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THEMATIC GUIDE

Teaching Nonfiction

HIGH SCHOOL

This guide encourages high school students to explore nonfiction topics of interest and cultivate skills in critical, visual, and informational literacy, all while reading the types of text they will be encountering in college, in their careers, and in life.

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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."

At the high school level, nonfiction not only addresses all ranges of student inquiry and interests, but also builds content knowledge in science, social studies, and technical courses. Nonfiction books in content classrooms serve as 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 topics of interest and cultivate skills in critical, visual, and informational literacy, all while reading the types of text they will be encountering in college, in their careers, and in life.

ABOUT THE TITLES IN THIS COLLECTION

Being Heumann:
An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist

JUDITH HEUMANN and KRISTEN JOINER

9780807002803
Beacon Press | Paperback
$16.99 | 232 pages | Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

Judith Heumann's *Being Heumann* details the remarkable life of a disability rights advocate determined to find belonging for herself and her fellow humans.

Diary of a Dying Girl:
Adapted from *Salt in My Soul*

MALLORY SMITH

9780593647509
Random House Books for Young Readers | Paperback
$13.99 | 384 pages | Lexile: 1120L | Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

Diary of a Dying Girl, based on the journals of Mallory Smith, details the challenges and hopes of growing up, the frustration of having an invisible illness, and the determination to "live happy" despite, and beyond, her limitations.

Fire Weather:
On the Front Lines of a Burning World

JOHN VAILLANT

9780525434245
Vintage | Paperback
$20.00 | 432 pages | Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

Fire Weather, by John Vaillant, is an investigative retelling of the 2016 Canadian inferno that forever altered the climate change landscape.

His Name Is George Floyd:
One Man's Life and the Struggle for Racial Justice

ROBERT SAMUELS and TOLUSE OLORUNNIPA

9780593490822
Penguin Books | Paperback
$20.00 | 448 pages | Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

In *His Name Is George Floyd*, investigative reporters Robert Samuels and Toluse Olorunnipa detail the struggle for racial justice elevated by the life and death of George Floyd.

The Undocumented Americans

KARLA CORNEJO VILLAVICENCIO

9780399592706
One World | Paperback
$19.00 | 208 pages | Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's *The Undocumented Americans* paints a picture of immigration that is unapologetically personal, for those who are undocumented, and for the author herself.

USING NONFICTION TO BUILD KNOWLEDGE, RELEVANCY, AND ENGAGEMENT

The following activities leverage nonfiction to provide access, promote interest, and to support students as critical readers, writers, and thinkers in all content classes.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

High school-level nonfiction texts address complex content. Support students' access to these texts and topics with the use of essential questions. Questions model how to set a purpose for reading, how to engage in inquiry, and how to think critically about important topics in science, history, technology, and more. Ultimately, students should ask and seek answers to their own questions as they read. The following essential questions frame some of the complex content in this text set and can be used for reading, writing, and discussion.

1. What does it mean to be undocumented in America?
2. How is the topic of mental health viewed by different individuals and organizations?
3. What is the impact of climate change on patterns of wildfire?
4. How are fires both essential and devastating to the ecosystem?
5. What is the status of racial justice in our country?
6. What does equity look like? How do we contribute to a world where all belong?
7. What does it mean to be an advocate? What does it mean to be an activist?
8. How can telling our story through memoir impact our own and others' views?
9. What are the impacts and implications of having a "hidden illness"?
10. How might an awareness of our future legacies shape our life choices?

DIGITAL GALLERY WALK

Challenge partner teams to create a collaborative slide deck that serves as a digital gallery walk. Explain that the purpose is to build knowledge around significant topics in the text, and that by the end of the period, students will be able to answer the following question: *How have specific laws, movements, individuals, organizations, and events led us to the current state of (select one) immigration/racial justice/disability rights/environmental protection in America?* In a digital gallery walk, teams claim a slide and post an image and a phrase or summary sentence on it before sharing with their classmates. When possible, partners should hyperlink their slides with websites, infographics, video clips, or podcasts. Explanations can be presented aloud or recorded on the slides using Mote (Mote.com) or another recording tool. Topics can be shared before reading or as they occur in the lesson or unit. Possible topics might include:

- *The Undocumented Americans*: Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Dream Act, House Bill 56, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Title 42

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- *His Name Is George Floyd*: #BlackLivesMatter, Cost of Police Misconduct Act, Derek Chauvin, HR 35, HR 4242, #SayHisName
- *Being Heumann*: Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today (ADAPT), Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504, World Institute on Disability (WID)
- *Fire Weather*: Canadian boreal forest, Fort McMurray, MWF-009, North Arctic Ecozone, Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Suncor, Symposium on Energy and Man
- *Diary of a Dying Girl:* Antimicrobial resistance (AMR), Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, Innovative Phage Applications and Therapeutics (IPATH), Mallory's Legacy Fund, The Pioneering Antimicrobial Subscriptions To End Upsurging Resistance (PASTEUR) Act, Dr. Steffanie Strathdee

BROWSABLE NONFICTION

Science, social studies, ELA, and other content classrooms are optimal locations for browsable nonfiction libraries. Students might read a variety of self-selected titles for interest, or they can read the same or different titles in order to support core instruction. In content classes, independently reading nonfiction texts that are course-related can build background knowledge and support current instruction. Self-selected nonfiction books that may or may not be content related promote choice and engage students in topics that make them curious. Whether the classroom library is strictly content based or mixed, provide time each week for students to browse titles and read silently. Ask students to "hold their thinking" by annotating or responding to text. Model how to take double-column notes or another annotation technique. For instance, students interested in racial justice might be drawn to *His Name Is George Floyd*. For active note-taking, students might compile a list of Floyd's song lyrics, recording and reflecting as they read. Rather than formal tests on completion or comprehension, these student notes serve as learning records.

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.

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

READ-ALOUDS

Introductory read-alouds hook readers, provide relevance, and open entry points to the complex features and vocabulary of disciplinary reading. When students in science, social studies, and other courses use accessible trade books to introduce curricular units, they build content vocabulary, knowledge, and interest in the unit's big ideas. Whether the read-aloud is conducted by the teacher, by pairs of students, or by an engaging audio recording, students read along, taking notes on big ideas, significant vocabulary, or notices and wonders. Listed below are some read-aloud ideas using the titles in this nonfiction collection to introduce a new unit.

- Read aloud the prologue of *Fire Weather* to introduce an AP Environmental Science unit on stratospheric ozone or the impact of human behavior on the environment. Students read along, noting words, phrases, and images that stand out as they read. Discuss student reactions.
- To start a civics unit on marginalized groups, ask students to partner-read chapter 12 of *Being Heumann*, recording specific impacts of President Donald Trump's executive order "to alleviate unnecessary regulatory burdens" (p. 205). Discuss the marginalization of people with disabilities in the United States, the progress made, and the progress lost.
- Play an audio of *The Undocumented Americans*, chapter one, (prhlink.com/undocumentedamericansbook) to introduce an immigration unit in U.S. History or AP Human Geography. Students record notices and wonders. Discuss the potential impact of such personalized reporting.
- Read aloud the introduction to *His Name Is George Floyd* to kick off an advocacy unit in ELA class. Ask students to jot down any patterns and big ideas as they develop. Invite students to discuss in small groups how the extended metaphor of breathing appears throughout the introduction and how it frames the story to come.
- At the start of health class units on mental and emotional health, read aloud the foreword from *Diary of a Dying Girl*, the portion penned by Mallory Smith. While reading, students keep two bulleted lists: what cystic fibrosis has taken from Mallory and what it has given her. Partners turn and talk, comparing their lists before sharing with the class.

USING NONFICTION TO BUILD KNOWLEDGE, RELEVANCY, AND ENGAGEMENT

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 or prhlink.com/depthofknowledge). Ask students to create their own questions about the text they are reading, making sure to include questions at every level. For example, while reading *Being Heumann*, students might ask: "What was the purpose of the Section 504 sit-in?" or "What were the direct and indirect impacts of the sit-in on the development of the Americans with Disabilities Act?" To extend, 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 student-generated questions, see this article from Edutopia (prhlink.com/deeperthinking).

WORD STUDY

Because nonfiction text integrates domain-specific language, students benefit from 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 classroom or traveling word walls, and students can engage in games and activities to solidify their learning. While traveling word wall lists might contain the same vocabulary as the classroom word wall, these individual student notebook lists are also handy during independent, small-group, or self-selected reading, where students reading different titles can jot down words they determine to be new, important, or confusing. For instance, a student reading *Diary of a Dying Girl* might record content-specific words such as *antimicrobial resistance, cystic fibrosis, phage therapy, progressive disease, resistant bacteria,* and *superbug*.

MENTOR WRITING TEXTS

Mentor texts are model essays, books, or multimodal works that introduce or clarify the genre and inspire students to see themselves as writers in the various disciplines. Modeling a variety of relevant and diverse informational 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 writing purpose. Ask students to analyze the mentor piece before applying its style, format, or a specific element to their own writing. More on mentor texts can be found at

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Edutopia (prhlink.com/mentortextsedu) Specific examples from this collection where mentor texts can inspire content writing include:

- With *The Undocumented Americans*, *Fire Weather*, or *His Name Is George Floyd* for inspiration, select a specific political or social justice issue and summarize one aspect of it in the form of an investigative journalism report.
- Compose a short explainer summarizing a complex science issue, like *Fire Weather*'s discussion of petrochemical fuels (p. 209) or *Diary of a Dying Girl*'s treatment of phage therapy (pp. 369–370).
- Select a significant event or time in your life and write an entry about it in memoir style, such as in *Diary of a Dying Girl*, *The Undocumented Americans*, or *Being Heumann*.
- Write a short persuasive essay about an important legislation. Structure your argument like *Being Heumann*'s "How do we move forward now?" section (pp. 207–209).

USING NONFICTION TO TEACH VISUAL AND INFORMATIONAL LITERACY

The following activities foster visual and informational literacies. Students are asked to explore or create images, video, and other multimodal components of nonfiction text, and to consider multiple perspectives while analyzing, contextualizing, and evaluating nonfiction sources.

GRAPH ANALYSIS

Challenge students to interpret visual and scientific images that are included in or supportive of nonfiction text. For instance, in *Fire Weather*, John Vaillant cites data from the Climate Change Performance Index (ccpi.org), which illustrates the impact of greenhouse gas emissions, as well as the global land-ocean temperature index, which reveals changes in global surface temperature (prhlink.com/nasatemp). Ask students to interpret and reflect on graphs or infographics like these by responding to the prompts below. For more on graph analysis, including samples, see "Turner's Graph of the Week" (turnersgraphoftheweek.com).

- What is the general topic of the graph?
- What specific factors are being compared or illustrated? (If there are x and y axes or colors, what do they indicate?)
- What are some observations you can make as you look at the graph?
- What is a prediction you can make as you reflect on the graph?
- Write a short summary about what the graph is conveying to you.

LENSES FOR DIALOGUE

Challenge students to consider various lenses through which to view institutional racism. In *His Name Is George Floyd*, Toluse Olorunnipa cites Floyd's dying words: "I. Can't. Breathe" (p. 385). Discuss with students how these words have been used by other victims of racial injustice and have become a rallying cry for the Black Lives Matter movement. Project on the whiteboard an image of Eme Freethinker's George Floyd mural, painted on the remnants of the Berlin Wall (prhlink.com/floydmural). The mural depicts an image of Floyd, as well as the hashtags #ICan'tBreathe and #SayHisName. Using the "Lenses for Dialogue" thinking routine (prhlink.com/lensesdialogue), ask students to reflect on the mural and exchange perspectives about structured racism in America. In this small-group discussion protocol, students:

- See: Make detailed observations about the art work.
- Choose: Consider the lens through which they see this work and take turns sharing aloud.
- Probe: Ask each other for more information. (Tell me more about why you think/feel...)
- Reflect: Look again at the artwork and consider how other lenses impact their thinking.

After groups have completed the thinking routine, discuss: *In racial justice advocacy, what has become the broader meaning of "I Can't Breathe"? How does reflecting on this art and on different perspectives confirm, clarify, or extend our understanding of the text and topic?*

SPAR DEBATE

Challenge students to frame arguments on both sides of an issue and then support those arguments with evidence. In spontaneous argumentation (SPAR) debates, students compose an argument with evidence in one to two minutes and then respond quickly to the opposing side. The goal is for students to see and understand multiple perspectives on important but incendiary issues, as well as to speak and listen to others in a civil and productive manner. Students are provided a debatable proposition, then are given one to two minutes to compose an argument with evidence. Students do not necessarily argue the side they agree with. Both sides have one minute to present their arguments while the other side takes notes. Finally, after a three-minute preparation period, both sides engage in a discussion where they can challenge or clarify the opponent's thinking, plus offer new arguments of their own. Scaffolds might include a graphic organizer to plan the initial argument and a partner or team to generate ideas and evidence. After the debate, discuss: *What is the value in debating a position different from your own?* For details on SPAR, see this from Facing History and Ourselves (www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/spar-spontaneous-argumentation).

Debatable propositions related to the texts in this set include:

- Confronting structuralized ableist language is a necessary step in disability justice.
- A national registry of police misconduct would cause more problems than solutions.
- Undocumented day laborers hired by American staffing companies should receive the same rights and protections afforded to documented workers.
- Nuclear energy is an effective and appropriate solution to global warming.
- CDC efforts to research and combat antimicrobial resistance (AMR) must continue to receive full or increased funding.

VALUES, IDENTITIES, ACTIONS

In *Diary of a Dying Girl*, Mallory Smith uses her journal to detail the dreams and challenges of growing up with a disease that will ultimately end her life. Determined to live with intention, her writing becomes her legacy. Invite students to consider the following question: *What is the meaning of "legacy"?* Next, view with the class Diane Shader Smith's TEDx Talk, "Salt in My Soul: Love, Loss, Legacy" (prhlink.com/saltsoulyt). The video starts with Mallory's narration before transitioning to her mother's talk. Diane explains that her purpose in making this video is to "talk about (Mallory's) life and her legacy with the hope that hearing her story will inspire you to think about yours. Legacy means different things to different people. Some think it's about a gift that you leave. Others think it's about leaving something in people rather than for them. I think legacy is important because it gives those of us left behind something to cling to … Mallory knew that she had a legacy that would impact others." After the TEDx Talk, challenge students to reflect on Mallory's legacy, and their own, by applying the "Values, Identities, Actions" thinking routine to both the TEDx Talk and to *Diary of a Dying Girl* (prhlink.com/pzvia). Ask students:

- What values do these works ask us to think about?
- Whom do these works speak about? Whom are these works trying to speak to?
- What actions might these works encourage?

Afterwards, ask: *How does this video and our activity extend our understanding of the text?*

CIRCLES OF ACTION

In *Fire Weather*, John Vaillant chronicles the events leading to the inescapable impact of fossil fuels on temperature change and fire in Alberta, Canada. After students have read part or all of the text, show them the Global News video "Fort McMurray Wildfire: A Timeline of a Disaster" (prhlink.com/fortmcmurrayyt). As they watch, students should record words, phrases, and images that make an impression. After the video, invite students to turn and talk with a partner before

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sharing with the class their impressions of the timeline video. Discuss: *How does the video deepen our understanding of the events described in* Fire Weather*?* Next, ask students to consider the author's broader themes by applying the "Circles of Action" discussion protocol (prhlink.com/pzcircles), where they will consider their roles in advocating for environmental justice issues like fossil fuels, greenhouse gases, and climate change. Small groups will concept map these topics and ask "What Can I Do to Contribute…":

- in my inner circle (of friends, family, the people I know)?
- in my community (my school, my neighborhood)?
- in the world (beyond my immediate environment)?

IDENTITY CHART

Identity is a recurring motif in *Being Heumann*. Challenge students to think critically about how identity is formed, both in the texts as well as in society. According to the organization Facing History and Ourselves, identity charts can "deepen students' understanding of themselves, groups, nations, and historical and literary figures." Ask students to create an identity chart for an author or another significant person in the nonfiction text. Students should first place that person's name in the center of a starburst. At the end of each ray extending from the name, they will fill in a text box with a superficial characteristic. Next, prompt students to think more critically by facing additional arrows inward. The inward rays reflect how subjects see themselves, while the outward rays depict the way they are seen by society. For example, outward rays for Judith Heumann in *Being Heumann* might include "paralyzed," "activist," and "Jewish," while her inward facing rays read "unrepentant," "tireless," and "pioneer." The goal is to reflect on how identity is shaped and stereotypes built by both internal and external factors, not only in the text, but in students' lives, as well. Afterwards, students can create their own identity charts and, if they choose, share them with peers in order to build community and challenge stereotypes. For templates and more information about identity charts, see Facing History and Ourselves (prhlink.com/facinghistoryidentity).

CER ANALYSIS

Ask students to use the "Claim, Evidence, Reasoning" (CER) framework to analyze arguments evident in any of the nonfiction books in this set, as well as in secondary texts that support lesson goals. In *The Undocumented Americans*, one entry that lends itself to CER is in chapter 4, "Flint" (pp. 113–115). In this section, Cornejo Villavicencio argues: "What I saw in Flint was a microcosm of the way the government treats the undocumented everywhere, making the conditions in this country as deadly and toxic and inhumane as possible so that we will self deport" (p. 115). Challenge students to record the claims, evidence, and reasoning in this section, identifying how Cornejo Villavicencio develops and refines her claims, and evaluating the effectiveness of her argument. Next, ask students to read

the online article "The Forgotten Victims of the Flint Water Crisis" (prhlink.com/tpflint). After reading, discuss: *How did the article support Cornejo Villavicencio's depiction of the Flint crisis in* The Undocumented Americans*? How does Cornejo Villavicencio's essay differ from the article?*

DIGITAL BULLETIN BOARD

Being Heumann, *The Undocumented Americans*, and *His Name Is George Floyd* all explore representations of power and privilege in America. Invite students to interrogate one or more of these books and/or paired texts from news outlets, social media, etc., in order to consider bias and representation. One arena for developing a sense of critical questioning is a shared digital bulletin board such as Padlet (padlet.com). Using this interactive tool, students can post reflections and respond to classmates. For example, students reading chapter five of *His Name Is George Floyd*, "The State of Texas vs. George Floyd," might be given as a paired text with the NBC News article "Indictments dropped against 17 Texas police officers over tactics used during 2020 George Floyd protests," detailing the results of protests and proceedings following Floyd's death (prhlink.com/nbctx17). After students have read both the chapter and the article, post the following prompt on the digital bulletin board: Discuss representations of power and privilege in chapter 5 of *His Name Is George Floyd* and in the NBC news article about the case. Consider the following in your response:

- Who wrote this section/book? Why did they write it?
- Who has power in this section/book? Who does not? Why?

After students have had a chance to respond, ask them to read classmates' posts and respond with emojis, comments, questions, and links that prompt critical thinking from all involved. For scaffolding and support, model responses and provide guidelines for respectful conversations.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Whether it is correcting biased social narratives, taking responsibility for the natural world, or advocating for life-saving technology, the titles in this set encourage students to see themselves as action takers and change makers. Using one or more of the books as inspiration, challenge students to create a shared or independent product or project that involves transformative action. Ask students to select a local or national organization or movement targeting environmental protection, social justice, or another big idea from the text(s) and produce a related multimedia product or project. The product should integrate ideas from the text(s) with outside research and students' own critical thinking. For example, products could inform an audience of a specific immigrant advocacy movement, such as United We Dream, or elevate a disability justice leader, such as Molly Burke. Students can focus on solutions explored by authors or movement leaders. Or, students might connect with community organizations already doing the work. Products should be published or presented to an

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authentic audience of peers, school leaders, or community members. Responses should reflect individual choice and interests, and might include:

- A podcast using free audio recording and editing software, such as Audacity (www.audacityteam.org).
- A TED Talk-type video speech complete with scripted narration aided by cue cards. Students can use cell phones or tablets to record their talks.
- A digital story using iMovie or Windows Movie Maker. Digital stories combine narration and still images and are easily created on student laptops.
- An infographic using Canva (www.canva.com) or a similar platform to illustrate the topic with engaging images and text.
- An interactive web page that combines multiple digital features to tell a story. With Google Sites or Adobe Spark (spark.adobe.com), students can combine text, social graphics, video, and audio.
- A service-learning product of value to an existent organization. Products might include hard copy or digital brochures, posters, websites, infographics, advertisements, or alternative ideas. Students should write a brief proposal for approval.

RESOURCES

The following resources provide more information and ideas for teaching with nonfiction.

- "Guiding Students to Develop Multimodal Literacy" edutopia.org/article/guiding-students-develop-multimodal-literacy
- "How to Incorporate Visual Literacy in Your Instruction" edutopia.org/article/how-incorporate-visual-literacy-your-instruction
- Penguin Random House Secondary Education High School Collection 2024 penguinrandomhousesecondaryeducation.com/titlelist/high-school-collection-2024
- Position Statement on the Role of Nonfiction Literature ncte.org/statement/role-of-nonfiction-literature-k-12
- "10 Intriguing Photographs to Teach Close Reading and Visual Thinking Skills" archive.nytimes.com/learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/27/10-intriguing-photographs-to-teach-close-reading-and-visual-thinking-skills

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