



## education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

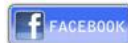
a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

January 20, 2012

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>

Follow Education Review on Facebook



Robb, Laura. (2010) *Teaching Nonfiction Writing: A Practical Guide*. Scholastic: New York.

Pages: 336 ISBN: 0545239664

Reviewed by Linda G. Hanna  
West Chester University

In a highly informative and well documented guide, Laura Robb breathes new life into non-fiction writing as an engaging and rewarding experience for young writers. Weeding through years of interviews, correspondence and dialogue with noted authors within the field of non-fiction writing, Robb extracts precious gems which speak to the heart of this beloved yet frequently ignored form of writing. Through the words of noted greats in the field of non-fiction writing, students and teachers alike are invited in the beginning of each chapter to enjoy and appreciate these seasoned models, accept their advice and direction, and to apply it within their own non-fiction writing. The process is reawakened through the already comfortable vehicle of writers' workshop by using these authors' excerpts as mini-lessons and from these respected authors today's students learn "to read widely in order to write well" (p. 10).

Citation: Hanna, Linda G. (2012 January 20) Review of *Teaching Nonfiction Writing* by Laura Robb. *Education Review*, 15. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1140.pdf>

Within the first chapter of the book a platform is set by defining goals and detailing steps for setting a creative environment. By embracing the practices which Robb suggests, students may grow and thrive in their quest to become skilled writers of non-fiction. These teacher rituals include presenting mini-lessons, building in time for discussion, reading and analyzing non-fiction, using writing guidelines, helping students view writing as discovery, permitting students to choose writing topics, providing students with sufficient time for writing, and teaching students the writing process. Though challenged by the demands of high-stakes testing, Robb reminds teachers that writing cannot be a happening but an evolution. Only by creating time for each strand - “of thinking, collecting, focusing, planning and organizing, drafting, and revising” (p. 28) - will the young writers reach their potential.

The second chapter guides both teachers and students in the tasks of establishing structure and identifying features within their non-fiction writing. This is best accomplished by reading many examples of non-fiction with a writer’s eye for greater learning and understanding. Numerous mini-lessons are presented to define the structural conventions of employing chronological order, compare and contrast, cause and effect, description, question and answer, and problem and solution. As students read frequently more layers of knowledge and experience prove to sharpen their writers’ eyes and the needed structures unconsciously are incorporated into their non-fiction writing efforts.

Integral steps in the non-fiction writing process-- selecting a topic, conducting research and preparing a draft—are thoroughly explained within chapter three. Robb provides excellent strategies for guiding young writers in topic selection. Effective use of brainstorming, fast-writing, pair-sharing, and journaling (including unsent letters, diaries, and wish-writing) are ready vehicles within the normal classroom experience. Students’ sensory experiences can be heightened through guided observations, listening walks, and classroom non-fiction reading collections in an effort to guide each in selecting an appropriate topic for writing. As Robb moves her teacher audience into the research phase as a coach and

model, teachers immerse their students in reading, retelling and note-taking. As students are guided in narrowing topics, teacher strategies focus on thinking small (to cover the topic well), identifying an audience, meeting readers' needs, using peer feedback to refocus, providing on-going feedback to students, and widening students' reading experiences.

In chapter four, Robb continues the drafting process with sound strategies for teachers in: developing leads, utilizing strong language in the writing, and crafting powerful endings. Mini-lessons model posing questions, introducing facts, sharing anecdotes, choosing quotations, mirroring action, and presenting dialogue as effective leads for practice writing sessions with students. Once the students demonstrate mastery, they may proceed with writer's intuition and choose that which fits best. As the draft unfolds teachers are presented with an array of mini-lessons and activities in modeling the importance of well-chosen language: sensory images, strong verbs and specific nouns. Robb completes the chapter with a series of energetic endings and discusses each with student audiences to uncover the relevance and effectiveness of each as she veers away from the "one size fits all" model.

As the student's writing efforts progress, Robb directs the reader's attention to the preparation and development of different types of paragraphs. Very specific applications and examples are provided for descriptive, informative, narrative, how-to, and opinion paragraphs. Guidelines, management tips, and discussion questions address student needs and classroom learning formats. Feedback options are presented which examine paragraph plans, relevant questions (to be posed), and constructive feedback mechanisms (teachers may choose). Writing samples clearly reflect student growth from "writing paragraphs to composing essays" (p. 172).

Within chapters six and seven Robb considers purpose and examines techniques which inform, persuade, and analyze. Teaching points for the writing of personal essays and short memoirs on differing grade levels are shared. Special emphasis is given to the weaving of different purposes in writing and the role of the analytical essay in examining different kinds of text. Very practical strategies are presented for modeling and collaboration. In chapter seven

Robb continues to focus on non-fiction genre by discussing student favorites: book reviews, interviews, biographies, journals, and diaries. Guidelines, models, prompts and building blocks for the genre are practical, detailed and student-friendly. Each of the master authors provides excellent points for student discussion and application.

The foci for chapter eight are the areas of revising, editing and assessing. Robb established the need for clear writing criteria as a means of “playing fair” with students when providing feedback. Her examples address content, style and organization, writing conventions (mechanics and usage) on varying grade levels and each is specific and practical. Her revision strategies build on student’s strengths while posing appropriate questions and fostering student independence. Peer and self-revision are encouraged with clear guidelines and practical checklists included for different grade levels. Strategies for editing with protocols and symbols are explained and collaboration is encouraged throughout all aspects of the process. Kudos to Robb for another practically-oriented and user-friendly guide!

### About the Reviewer

Linda G. Hanna is a professor in the Department of Early and Middle Grades Education at West Chester University in Pennsylvania.

---

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.

*Education Review/Reseñas Educativas* is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>



Editors

Gene V Glass

[glass@edrev.info](mailto:glass@edrev.info)

Gustavo Fischman

[fischman@edrev.info](mailto:fischman@edrev.info)

Melissa Cast-Brede

[cast-brede@edrev.info](mailto:cast-brede@edrev.info)

---