A New Way to Look at Literature: A Visual Model for Analyzing Fiction and Nonfiction Texts

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The author draws upon her work as a writer to broaden teachers’ and readers’ understanding of fiction and nonfiction literature, and to provide them with a tool for analyzing texts.

Over the course of my career, I have written both fiction and nonfiction stories and books. However, my experiences during many years of doing author visits and teaching classroom teachers have led me to be concerned about the underrepresentation of nonfiction books in the literature that is offered to young readers. My interactions with educators, librarians, and publishers have provided me with many dramatic examples. When I visit schools or give speeches, I am inevitably told that I am the first nonfiction author to visit or to speak. When I survey publishers’ catalogues, I routinely count far more fiction books than nonfiction. When I ask teachers in my classes at Queens College to do an inventory of the books in their classrooms, they overwhelmingly report that fiction books outnumber nonfiction books. For example, teachers have reported disparities as great as 300 fiction books to 50 nonfiction and “too many to count” fiction books to 25 nonfiction books.

In June 2005, I collected summer reading lists for children of all ages from 11 public libraries in northern New Jersey. All the books on all the lists were fiction. As for reviews, in the Nov. 21, 2005, Publishers Weekly, now known as PW, there were reviews of 13 fiction books and 3 nonfiction books for children. In terms of recognition, I discovered that the 2005 Newbery Medal and Caldecott Medal, arguably the most prestigious and certainly the most visible awards, went to 7 fiction books and 1 nonfiction book. In 2006, those awards went to 8 fiction books and 2 nonfiction books.

Note that this is not the case in the adult world of books. For example, each week The New York Times Book Review features more nonfiction books than fiction. The Pulitzer Prize honors 11 types of nonfiction writing (e.g., history, public service, investigative reporting, international reporting, editorial writing), and 1 type of fiction writing (drama). The National Book Award honors both fiction and nonfiction. In 2005, the focus was on the nonfiction winner Joan Didion and her book The Year of Magical Thinking (2005).

Nonfiction Literacy Matters

The relative absence of nonfiction in literature for young readers may have serious implications because nonfiction literacy matters. Nonfiction material is the crucible within which readers can gain the knowledge and skills that enable them to reach sound decisions in all arenas of life, avoid gullibility born of ignorance, and participate in an informed and active citizenry. Nonfiction is the currency with which public policies and legislation are enacted, societal needs are discussed, cultural aesthetics are defined, life lessons are conveyed, scientific findings and historical narratives are transmitted, and matters of war and peace are decided. Nonfiction is everywhere! It is the stuff of everyday life—the infinite list of activities and duties and decisions and feelings and fears and happiness. Nonfiction is there and here and everywhere (Colman, 2004). So how, one might ask, did fiction come to dominate classrooms and curricula? I think there are five reasons, some of which I have discussed in an earlier article (Colman, 1999).

Influence of Powerful Fiction Lovers

First, in the world of literature for children and young adults, there have been powerful editors, educators, reviewers, and librarians whose strong personal preference for fiction have affected which authors were featured and what types of books were published, promoted, and selected for everything from awards to booktalks, from...
story times to book lists. In recent years, a growing chorus of nonfiction advocates has begun to spearhead efforts to promote nonfiction. One example was the establishment of the Orbis Pictus Award in 1989 by The National Council of Teachers of English. Still, at this point, fiction rules the roost.

**Introduction of the Terms**

**Informational/Information**

The second reason emerged in the early 1970s when Zena Sutherland (1972) coined the phrase *informational books* as another term for nonfiction books for children and young adults. That same year, Margery Fisher (1972) coined the term *information books*. They were not the first people to propose new terms for nonfiction. Writing in the 1960s, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Barbara Tuchman (1985) called nonfiction a “despicable term” because, she wrote,

> I do not feel like a Non-something: I feel quite specific. I wish I could think of a name in place of “Nonfiction.” . . . “Writers of Reality” is the nearest I can come to what I want, but I cannot very well call us “Realtors” because that has been pre-empted—although as a matter of fact I would like to. “Real Estate,” when you come to think of it, is a very fine phrase and it is exactly the sphere that writers of nonfiction deal in: the real estate of . . . human conduct. I wish we could get it back from the dealers in land. Then the categories could be poets, novelists, and realtors.” (p. 46)

Realtor, of course, did not catch on, but both *information* and *informational* did and are widely used today. One or the other term has replaced *nonfiction* in many children’s literature textbooks and journal articles. *Information* or *informational* are used as labels in many children’s sections in libraries. The Association for Library Services to Children of the American Library Association established an award in 2001 and called it The Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award.

Sutherland and Fisher never intended that their terms would limit people’s understanding of the complexity, richness, and literary nature of nonfiction. However, over time that is what has happened as their terms were carried forth without the context and content of Sutherland’s and Fisher’s understandings. This is problematic because the typical semantic association adults and youngsters make when they hear the term *information books* is encyclopedias or textbooks. The term *information book* does not readily trigger associations with the variety of nonfiction books—biographies, history, true adventure, science, sports, photographic essays, memoirs, etc.—that are available and accessible for children and young adults and that can be just as compelling, engaging, and beautifully written as good fiction.

**Money**

The third reason that fiction dominates the world of literature for children and young adults (and from the perspective of publishers, perhaps the most important) is money. According to a children’s book editor, “Nonfiction is more expensive and time consuming on all fronts. Straight fiction does not usually require photo placement and heavy design, expensive fact checking, indexing, and often substantive changes in first proofs. Also, books are more costly to produce because paperstock needs to be better for photo reproduction, and this drives up the cost/price of the book, often to $20. We are very selective in whom we publish and what content we publish given the stakes” (C. Ottaviano, personal communication, November 18, 2005).

**Safety of Fiction**

The fourth reason for the prominence of fiction in classrooms and curricula is that fiction is safer than nonfiction because readers can remain distant, even detached, from dissonant, unsettling material.

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**Myths and Misconceptions**

The fifth reason is that many people have uncritically accepted a variety of myths and misconceptions about nonfiction. These include:

- Nonfiction is boring.
- Nonfiction will not hook kids on reading.
- Nonfiction is more appealing and appropriate for boys than for girls.
Nonfiction is for skimming or dipping in and out of, not for reading from beginning to end.

Nonfiction books are not "real" books.

Nonfiction only provides information.

Nonfiction is not relevant.

Nonfiction is too hard for kids to read.

Nonfiction is too hard for kids to understand.

Nonfiction is not literature.

Nonfiction is devoid of an author’s voice.

Nonfiction is not aesthetic.

Nonfiction is not creative.

Nonfiction is hard to find.

Nonfiction reading does not help students learn how to write.

DEFINITIONS MATTER: THREE EXAMPLES

Not only is nonfiction underrepresented, but it is often defined in inconsistent and misleading ways. For the past five years, I have asked elementary and secondary school teachers in my classes to write their definitions of nonfiction. Here are three typical responses: 1. Fiction is fake, nonfiction is not; 2. Fiction is based on imagination and nonfiction is based on facts; 3. Fiction is read for pleasure and nonfiction is read for information.

All of these definitions are misleading. First, thinking that fiction is fake or not real undermines the verisimilitude that many fiction authors strive to achieve. Mark Twain (Dawidziak, 1996) once wrote that: “The only difference between fiction and nonfiction is that fiction should be completely believable.” (p. 30)

It is also misleading to define fiction as based on imagination and nonfiction as based on facts because that dismisses the role of imagination in nonfiction. “I began to write from the imagination, but I did not write fiction,” LeAnne Schreiber (1996) said about writing her memoir *Light Years*. “It took all the imagination I had to try to find words that were faithful to the complexities, contradictions, and subtleties of being alive, sentient, irreducibly particular” (p. 7). According to biographer Leon Edel (1987), “I’m using one kind of imagination and a novelist uses a different kind. . . . My imagination is used in finding a structure and form” (p. 10).

As for the third response—defining fiction as reading for pleasure and nonfiction as reading for information—that miseducates students about what to expect from fiction and nonfiction. Many students derive pleasure from reading nonfiction books about everything from animals to sports to real life adventures. Many fiction books convey information. For example, in her book, *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, Gennifer Choldenko conveys information about what is now called autism and families dealing with a child who has autism, and about life for non-prisoners and prisoners on Alcatraz Island in 1935. At the end of this book, there is even an author’s note with footnotes about autism and life on Alcatraz Island. Mary Hoffman (2003) imparts information about dealing with jealousy and death and a parent’s remarriage in *Encore Grace*. Through *Julie of the Wolves* and her many other fiction books, Jean Craighead George (1972) conveys information about nature and ecosystems along with information about a wolf pack, falcons, owls, weasels, foxes, prairie dogs, alpine tundra, and tropical rain forests.

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Adult World of Reading

Choldenko, Hoffman, and George mirror the approaches to fiction we find in books written for adults. In the adult world of reading, there is a plethora of information-rich fiction books by authors who go to great lengths to gather information and ensure that it is accurate—James Mitchener, Barbara Kingsolver, Richard North Patterson, Bharati Mukherjee, John Grisham, and Sandra Cisneros, to name just a few. John Jakes (McKinney, 1998), the author of the bestselling series *The Kent Family Chronicles*, prides himself on the historical information and accuracy of his novels: “I might be the only instructor a given reader has about a particular bit of history,” he says, “so it ought to be right. . . . We get enough misinformation in the world as it is. I’d rather not contribute any more” (p. 8).

What Is the Essence of the Difference between Nonfiction and Fiction

In thinking about definitions, I kept asking myself, “What is the essence of the difference between fiction and nonfiction?” Both can have
facts and information. Both can employ imagination. Both can provide pleasure and information. As a writer, I asked myself, “What is the difference in terms of what I can or cannot do?” The answer is: make up material. With fiction, I can. With nonfiction, I cannot. That insight led me to these definitions: Nonfiction is writing about reality (real people, places, events, ideas, feelings, things) in which nothing is made up. Fiction is writing in which anything can be made up.

DICHOTOMOUS WAYS OF PRESENTING FICTION AND NONFICTION

In addition to using varying definitions, teachers present the genres of fiction and nonfiction in dichotomous ways that are reflected in how students are asked to analyze them. With fiction, students are asked to identify the characters, plot, setting, themes, and problem/solution. With nonfiction, they are asked to identify the information, the organization, the text structure, and graphic organizers. This approach does not prepare students to experience the range of possibilities in both genres, e.g., information-rich fiction such as historical fiction or narrative nonfiction about real people in real settings dealing with real events.

Labeled Nonfiction, but Containing Made-Up Material

Another problem with this simplistic, dichotomous way of teaching fiction and nonfiction is that it does not account for a type of book that is widely used in schools—the type that is labeled nonfiction (or the commonly used synonym informational), but that also includes fictional elements. In the world of adult literature, there is much discussion about literatures that blur the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Several years ago, Columbia Graduate School of Journalism conducted a daylong conference on the issue of blurring the boundaries, or as they called it, “stretching the truth.”

This issue is exemplified in the controversy surrounding Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil by John Berendt that was on the New York Times hardcover nonfiction bestseller list for four years. At the end of the book in an author’s note, Berendt wrote: “Though this is a work of nonfiction, I have taken certain storytelling liberties, particularly having to do with the timing of events. Where the narrative strays from strict nonfiction, my intention has been to remain faithful to the characters and to the essential drift of events as they really happened” (unpaged). Berendt also admitted that he fabricated dialogue and created fictional scenes. Although the book was selected as a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in general nonfiction, the committee ruled it out because of Berendt’s “storytelling liberties.”

In the world of literature for young readers, however, books that blur the boundaries are unquestioningly accepted as nonfiction, or informational, by many reviewers, award committees, librarians, and teachers. For example, the popular The Magic School Bus stories by Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen are typically classified as nonfiction, despite mixing the fictional Mrs. Frizzle, a group of children, and a school bus that can fly together with information about dinosaurs, the ocean floor, a hurricane, the senses, etc. David Macaulay’s books about building things from castles to bridges are considered nonfiction, despite his inclusion of fictional people. So is Toni Morrison’s (2004) children’s book, Remember: The Journey to School Integration, in which she imagines captions for a series of photographs.

Hybrid Books

Some authors of books that are labeled nonfiction but contain fictional elements point out that parts of the book are made up. For example, at the end of The Magic School Bus Explores the Senses (Cole & Degen, 1999), “The Song of What’s Wrong” points out all the made-up material. In his preface for Castle (1982), David Macaulay identifies which parts of his book are fictionalized. In an introduction, Toni Morrison (2004) tells readers that she “imagined” the captions. The actual captions for each photograph are included at the end of the book. However, many teachers do not explicitly point out the fictional material that is included in books labeled nonfiction. Of course, some teachers do. For example, Carol Avery (1998), an elementary school teacher,
and her students use the word “faction” for such books. Other teachers call them blended books. In my genre schema, I use the term hybrid. Although some authors of these hybrid books do attempt to distinguish between nonfiction and fiction, other authors do not, or they place this information in an easy-to-overlook preface, author’s note, or back matter.

**A Visual Model for Analyzing Fiction and Nonfiction Texts: Nine Elements**

The hegemony of fiction and the dichotomous way of teaching fiction and nonfiction—prompted me to develop A Visual Model for Analyzing Fiction and Nonfiction Texts. I designed this model to provide educators and young readers with a tool for viewing literature in a more comprehensive and accurate way. My goal was to draw upon my writer’s perspective to broaden teachers’ and readers’ understanding of fiction and nonfiction literature.

For my model, I selected nine elements that reflect decisions writers make as part of the writing process. Decision making is an essential part of the writing process. Oftentimes I spend as much, if not more, time making decisions—about ideas, topics, sources, research, form, structure, style, diction, revisions—than I do physically writing. So do other writers, as borne out by my extensive collection of books and essays in which writers reflect on making writerly decisions. The outcomes of these decisions are reflected in the elements of a piece of writing. I believe my nine elements will help educators and readers better understand and appreciate the multifaceted nature of literature. Each element is shown on a continuum that represents the parameters of the writerly decision (see Table 1).

**Made-up Material**

The first element is made-up material. The end points of the continuum are No Made-up Material and All Made-up Material.

Made-up material is anything that is fictionalized or based on incomplete/unverifiable information or evidence. A writer’s decision on this element determines whether or not a piece is fiction, nonfiction, or hybrid regardless of the form—poetry, article, drama, etc.

Amy Bloom (2002), a fiction writer, described why she chose nonfiction for her book *Normal*, about transsexuals, cross-dressers, and the intersexed. “When I write fiction, I close my eyes and type. I pretend I have no parents, no spouses, and no children. . . . With this book, I never had that luxury. I had to look into the eyes of people. . . . I wondered how they had found the strength not only to live but thrive. . . . Fiction would have failed these people” (p. E1).

**Table 1. A visual model for analyzing fiction and nonfiction texts**

(first presented at the Charlotte Huck Nonfiction Symposium, Ohio State University, 2004)

**Notes:**
1. Made-up material is material that is fictionalized or unverifiable.
2. Information includes facts, events, biographical accounts, etc. that are real, actual, and verifiable.
3. Structure is how the material is organized, e.g., chronological, thematic, episodic, etc. Simple structures have one layer of organization. Complex structures have multiple layers.
5. Expository text conveys information or explains something.
6. Literary devices are techniques, such as diction, metaphors, repetition, telling details, etc.
7. Author’s voice is when the reader senses the presence of a distinct author by the style and/or voice in the text.
8. Front matter appears before the main text. Back matter appears after it.
9. Visual material includes illustrations, maps, graphs, diagrams, etc.
My books are social histories and biographies that, of course, I could write as historical fiction. But I chose nonfiction because I write about people and events that are typically on the margins or invisible in traditional history. I want readers to know: Yes, these were real people, leading real lives, and making real contributions. Yes, these are real role models with real life lessons for young readers. Yes, these are real historical events that contradict conventional wisdom, such as the belief a social studies teacher once expressed to me that “Women didn’t do anything until the late 1960s.”

Information

The second element is information. The end points of the continuum are Minimal Information and Lots of Information.

Information is facts, events, biographical accounts, etc. that are real, actual, and verifiable. This element refers to the quantity of information. My books tend to have a goodly amount of information that I weave into a narrative. I do this throughout Where the Action Was: Women War Correspondents in World War II (2002). Here is an example: Margaret Bourke-White had finally gotten permission to cover the war in Africa and asked to fly over. Military officials said that was too dangerous and arranged her passage on a troopship. Using quotes from her personal account, I interspersed information about her experience aboard that ship when it was hit by a torpedo.

Instead, in December 1942, she sailed on a troopship carrying nurses that was part of a large convoy.

In the early hours of the morning on December 22, a torpedo hit the ship. “The torpedo did not make as loud a crash as I had expected,” Bourke-White wrote, “nor did the ship list as much as it does in the movies. But somehow everyone on the sleeping transport knew almost instantly that this was the end of her.”

Bourke-White managed to save two of her six cameras and some film. She hoped to take pictures of the sinking ship, but when she realized that it was too dark, she headed for her lifeboat. As required, the other ships in the convoy sailed away to avoid being torpedoed. Two destroyers stayed behind to drop depth charges on the German submarines, not to rescue people. The hundreds of people packed into seventeen lifeboats would have to wait.

In Bourke-White’s crowded lifeboat, people rowed, bailed water with their helmets, and threw up as the boat tossed about. For a time, they heard a voice crying out in the distance, “I am all alone! I am all alone!” Unable to steer their lifeboat because the rudder had broken, Bourke-White wrote, they listened as “the cry drifted farther and farther away until it was lost in distant silence.” After about eight hours, a destroyer rescued them. Once aboard, Bourke-White photographed “the last of our family of lifeboats as their occupants were helped to the deck.” (pp. 30–32)

Structure

The third element is structure. The end points of the continuum are Simple Structure and Complex Structure.

Structure is how the material is organized—chronological, thematic, episodic, etc. Simple structures have one layer of organization. Complex structures have multiple layers of organization. “The older I get, and with every book I write, I find that the most important thing is what the bones of the book are going to be, what the structure is,” said Melissa Greene (Greene, Junger, Sides, & Sobel, 2005, p. 19), the author of Praying for Sheetrock, The Temple Bombing, and Last Man Out.

I do more thinking about structure than anything else. According to Dava Sobel, author of Longitude and Galileo’s Daughter, “Structuring a book is really the hardest part, I think” (Greene, Junger, Sides, & Sobel, 2005, p. 17). Joyce Carol Oates (Braiker, 2004) said, “I will never run out of things to say. I have pages and folders of notes. My problem is structure, how to put it together” (p. 4).

My structures tend toward the complex end, even my biographies where, for example, in A Woman Unafraid: The Achievements of Frances Perkins (1993), I use a modified-chronological...
structure by beginning the book in 1933, 53 years after Perkins’s birth. Here is the first paragraph:

Her first day at work as secretary of labor of the United States, Frances Perkins pulled out the drawers of her desk and found cockroaches. It wasn’t the first time Frances Perkins had seen cockroaches. As a social worker, she saw cockroaches all the time when she visited the dingy, dreary apartments where poor people lived. But now she was head of the Department of Labor in Washington, D.C. and a member of the president’s cabinet, the first woman cabinet member in American history.” (p. 1)

Four pages later after setting the context for the cockroaches and Perkins’s appointment, I start a straight chronology with the sentence:

Frances Perkins was born on April 10, 1880, in Boston, Massachusetts, almost fifteen years to the day after the Civil War ended. (p. 4)

I had several reasons for using this structure. First, I am always thinking about readers. How do I grab readers’ attention with the very first sentence? And a first sentence with cockroaches in it seemed like a winner. Second, that anecdote established Perkins’s importance upfront. Third, it sets me up to, a few paragraphs later, write this paragraph and engage readers in the drama of Perkins’s situation and reveal her character:

“We were in a terrible situation,” Perkins wrote years later. “Banks were closing. The economic life of the country was almost at a standstill.” Since William Doak, the secretary of labor before Perkins, had not done very much to help jobless people in America, perhaps it was inevitable that cockroaches had moved into the secretary of labor’s desk. But now Frances Perkins was taking over, and the cockroaches weren’t welcome. Quickly she eliminated the roaches and got to work.

My book Rosie the Riveter: Women Working on the Home Front in World War II (1995) is at the far right end of the continuum with a complex structure. I considered using a topical structure or writing a collective biography. However, as I did my research, I realized that the essence of the story, the untold essence, was the relationship between five interconnected stories: 1) life on the home front; 2) the mobilization; 3) the progress of the war; 4) the planning and execution of the propaganda campaign to get women in and out of the workforce; 5) the experiences of the women themselves as the opportunities appeared and then abruptly disappeared. To write Rosie the Riveter, I created an interwoven, multilayered structure that incorporated all five stories. In order to bring readers into this structure, I started Rosie with eight-year-old Dot Chastney’s story about the beginnings of World War II. Dot continues to appear at strategic places throughout the book as a commentator of sorts, moving the chronology and offering personal comments from a youngster’s perspective. Dot is my hand extended to the reader, saying, “Come with me and read this important and fascinating and complex real story.”

Finding the structure is an organic process, that is, it grows out of the material. For example, I had vast differences in the amount of primary source material for each of the women featured in Adventurous Women: Eight True Stories about Women Who Made a Difference (2006). Alice Hamilton wrote reports, letters, speeches, articles, textbooks, and her autobiography. Juana Briones and Biddy Mason never learned to read and write. There were also differences in the duration of their adventures. Katharine Wormeley’s adventure lasted three months. Mary Gibson Henry’s lasted almost 40 years. To deal with these differences, I decided to write each chapter as an essay, a flexible form that I love to read and write. That allowed me to write some chapters with extensive first-person and eyewitness accounts; another chapter has two parts—an essay and letter excerpts; and in another chapter, I write about my experience “meeting” one woman.

Narrative Text and Expository Text
The fourth and fifth elements are narrative text and expository text. The end points of the continuum are No Narrative Text and All Narrative Text and No Expository Text and All Expository Text.

Narrative text tells a story. Expository text conveys information or explains something. I use both, as do many writers. For example,
in *Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts: A History of Burial* (1997), I begin chapter two “Death Is Destiny: Understanding Death,” with narrative writing about my sister Cam (first paragraph of the excerpt) and segue into expository writing (second paragraph of the excerpt), a salient characteristic of my style in all my books:

My sister, Cam, was three years old when our brother Jon died and six years old when our father died. As a three-year-old, Cam didn’t really understand Jon’s death was final. She kept waiting for him to appear. When we took her to the funeral home and explained that Jon was in a closed coffin—“Jon’s box,” we called it—she said, “Open it! Let him out! He wants to play with me.” As a six-year-old, Cam understood that Dad’s death was final.

Cam’s reaction was not unusual, according to research done in Europe after World War II by Maria Nagy. A psychologist, Nagy asked 378 Hungarian children ranging in age from three to ten years old about their thoughts and feelings about death... Nagy studied their responses and concluded that some children go through three stages in understanding death. (p. 29)

**Literary Devices**

The sixth element is literary devices. The end points of the continuum are No Literary Devices and Many Literary Devices.

Literary devices are techniques such as diction or word choice; metaphors; repetition; and telling details that are used to create a particular effect or evoke a particular response.

I used a number of literary devices in *Adventurous Women: Eight True Stories about Women Who Made a Difference* (2006). Here is a section from the author’s note where I use repetition (follow my use of “about” in the first sentence and “Adventures” throughout the excerpt):

Adventures are about being bold, about defying set ways of thinking and behaving, about taking risks, going beyond the boundaries, the limitations, about overcoming obstacles, about daring to be different. Adventures can happen anywhere—in a laboratory or a library, at home or far away. Adventures do not discriminate: Any-one can have one—women, children, men of any age or race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, religion. I selected women because most adventure stories are about men, especially historical adventure stories. My intent is not to replace men but to add women. (p. 4)

I spend a great deal of time on diction, finding just the right word to convey the meaning and rhythm. The first sentence of *Rosie the Riveter* is a good example of the effect of one word: “The summer between second and third grade, Dot Chastney had her first inkling that things weren’t quite right in the world” (p. 1).

The word is “inkling,” and I chose it because it is a word that has a distinct sound and rhythm when it is read either out loud or silently; it is an attention-getting word. Try to substitute synonyms for inkling—hint, idea, clue, suggestion, intimation, indication, glimmer, sign—and decide whether or not you agree with my decision.

**Author’s Voice**

The seventh device is author’s voice. The end points of the continuum are Minimal Author’s Voice and Intense Author’s Voice.

Author’s voice is when the reader senses the presence of a distinct author by the style and/or voice in the text. Author’s voice can be both visible—the author uses personal pronouns and/or relates personal stories—and invisible—the reader senses the presence of an actual and distinctive author in the text. I appear as a visible author in three of my books: throughout *Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts: A History of Burial* (1997); in one picture in *Girls: A History of Growing Up Female in America* (2000); and in the chapter on Biddy Mason (chapter 7) in *Adventurous Women: Eight True Stories about Women Who Made a Difference* (2006).

I appear in *Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts* in two ways: in a picture in the preface (p. 4) and by including my own experiences in the preface and throughout the text. For example, the book begins with my conversation with my great-aunt:

My great-aunt Frieda Matousek called me with the news that her husband, Willi, was “having another attack.” I wasn’t surprised: Willi was
eighty-six years old and he had several health problems, including heart disease.

“Call his doctor,” I said. “I’m on my way.” (p. 15)

In Girls: A History of Growing Up Female in America, I included a picture of myself at the age of five (p. 159; see Figure 1). (The caption begins, “The author...,” which I later discovered was not specific enough because some readers did not realize that “The author” meant me, the author of the book!)

To compensate for the lack of information about Biddy Mason, an adventurous woman I was determined to write about despite the lack of material, I included my own story of how I first “met” Mason (second and third paragraphs of the excerpt):

Biddy Mason’s adventure started with a walk—about a two-thousand-mile walk from Mississippi to California, via Salt Lake City, Utah. At the time, she was a slave who worked in the cotton fields, tended to the animals, and used her knowledge of herbal medicine to heal sick people and her skills as a midwife to deliver babies.

But before I continue with Mason’s adventures, let me tell you about how I first “met” her during a trip to California in 1995.

As was my custom, I had identified places where I could find women’s history... When I got to Los Angeles, I went in search of the Biddy Mason Memorial. (p. 131)

As for finding the invisible author, readers should scrutinize the author’s style, or the how of what she or he writes by looking for characteristic diction, or choice of words; syntax, or types of sentence structures; and use of figurative language, etc. The brief excerpts from Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts and Adventurous Women demonstrate one mark of my writing—the unexpected, that is, that Frieda’s news was that Willi was “having another attack” and that “I wasn’t surprised,” and that Biddy Mason’s walk was “a two-thousand-mile-walk” and that she was “a slave.”

I also write in an accessible, direct, conversational style. I use different sentence lengths to vary the rhythm of my writing. In the following excerpt, note that I placed a short sentence (four words) in between the third sentence (nineteen words) and fifth sentence (twenty-nine words). I also used quotations to reveal character or convey information. When I use quotations, they are an integral part of the text. If I have to summarize or restate a quote (a typical practice in books for young readers), I do not use it. In the following excerpt, Hamilton’s own words in the last sentence tell readers that she wants to be a doctor and that she is independent (“I could go anywhere I pleased”) and adventurous (“to far-off lands or to city slums”) and has a social conscience (“be quite sure that I could be of use anywhere”). This excerpt is the first paragraph of chapter four, “Alice Hamilton: Super-sleuth,” in Adventurous Women.

Alice Hamilton wanted to be a medical doctor. Her sister told her that was a “disgusting” idea. When she expressed a desire to observe an operation, a teacher told her that she was “a bluggy-minded butcher.” But Alice was undeterred. “As a doctor,” she said, “I could go anywhere I pleased—to far-off lands or to city slums—and be quite sure that I could be of use anywhere.” (p. 63)

Front and Back Matter
The eighth element is front/back matter. The end points of the continuum are No Front/Back Matter and Copious Front/Back Matter.
Front matter appears before the main text and is comprised of such entries as the title page, table of contents, and preface. Back matter appears after the main text and may include the appendix, a glossary, and/or an index. *Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts* has a table of contents and preface in the front matter. The back matter has eight items: “When I Die . . .”; Where to Find the Remains and Burial Sites of Some Famous People; Epitaphs: Poignant, Pious, Patriotic, Historic, and Humorous; Common Carvings on Gravestones; Chronology; Glossary; Bibliography; Index. *Adventurous Women* has a table of contents and author’s note in the front matter. The back matter includes: Very Brief Chronologies; Places to Visit; Namesakes; Notes; Bibliography; Weblog; Index. The amount of front and back matter is typically determined by the number of pages a publisher has set for a particular book. Then the writer has to decide how to allocate those pages.

**Visual Material**

The ninth element is visual material. The end points of the continuum are No Visual Material and Copious Visual Material.

Visual material includes illustrations, photographs, maps, graphs, diagrams, etc. I do the picture research for my books, a time-consuming but essential endeavor that involves locating all types of vivid, unusual, and interesting visual materials.

I also take photographs, a practice I started when I wanted to include images that I could not find in existing picture archives, such as the Library of Congress. My photographs appear in most of my books, including 41 pictures in *Women in Society: United States of America* (1994) and 83 pictures in *Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts: A History of Burial*.

Over the years, I have traveled throughout America and photographed monuments, markers, and memorials to women. I draw upon my extensive collection for use in my books. There is a picture of the statue of Sybil Ludington in Carmel, New York, in *Girls: A History of Growing Up Female in America* (p. 55) and pictures of both the statue of Mary McLeod Bethune in Washington, DC and the memorial to Biddy Mason in Los Angeles in *Adventurous Women: Eight True Stories about Women Who Made a Difference* (p. 103 and p. 132; see Figure 2.)

**Application of the Visual Model to a Fiction and a Nonfiction Book**

My idea in developing the visual model is that teachers and readers can actually plot a text, such as a book, poem, essay, or article, to create a visual profile of the text that will facilitate comparisons and discussions.

I have used an impressionistic method to plot several of my nonfiction books, stories, and articles, and several fiction books by other authors. Although it would be possible to devise a precise quantitative method for plotting, I settled on an impressionistic method because I discovered that my impressions of the books that I plotted were almost identical to the impressions of other readers whom I asked to plot the books. Table 2 shows two examples of how I plotted: *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (2005, fiction) by Gennifer Choldenko and my nonfiction book *Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts: A History of Burial* (see Table 2). I used a simple fill-in approach to document my impression of how much of a particular element was in a book. If a particular element is not present, then the bar remains empty. I plotted the two books on the form that I use with my students.

*Figure 2. Photo of Biddy Mason Memorial from Adventurous Women*
Applying this visual model shows that, contrary to what is typically taught, nonfiction and fiction can have many similar and overlapping characteristics, that nonfiction can have an intense author’s voice, that fiction can have informational and expository text. The model can also be applied to provide a visual profile of hybrid books—books that are classified as nonfiction, but include fictional material—so that readers learn how to discern and differentiate the different types of material in these books.

I believe that my visual model can offer a new way to understand and assess literature, a way for teachers to make sure that the reading material they offer students represents the full range of high-quality literature, a way for teachers and students to compare and discuss their visual profiles of literature. One teacher, Kristine Eaton, added her observation that, “Both teachers and students can do an inventory of the books that they have, and by using the visual profile, they can see what kind of books they might want to add to the collection.” I trust that they will add lots of nonfiction.

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References


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