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# Fostering Habits of Mind: A Framework for Reading Historical Nonfiction Illustrated by the Case of Hitler Youth

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# Fostering Habits of Mind: A Framework for Reading Historical Nonfiction Illustrated by the Case of *Hitler Youth*

*“Nonfiction is about inquiry, about asking questions. . . . In history, the most important question is not what happened, but why it happened, and its implications for the present.”*

—Susan Campbell Bartoletti (2011)

Bartoletti’s assertion is in line with the Common Core State Standards’ (CCSS) recommendation to teach students disciplinary “norms and conventions,” as it suggests the importance of promoting students’ ability “to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas” in order to “answer questions or solve problems,” and it expresses a convincing rationale for using nonfiction in both English language arts (ELA) and social studies (NGA & CCSO, 2010).

The quote also relates to the characteristics of strong middle level education expressed in *This We Believe* (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010) such as providing middle level students with a challenging curriculum that is “exploratory, integrative, and relevant” and infused with “multiple learning approaches” (p. xii). While distinct disciplines, social studies and ELA emphasize certain habits of mind related to teaching historical nonfiction. In particular, historical nonfiction can be used to invite social studies and ELA students to practice discipline-specific tasks and engage deeply in texts in ways suggested by Bartoletti (Hinton, Suh, Colón-Brown, & O’Hearn, 2014).

Middle level students read nonfiction in and outside of class often and in efferent and aesthetic ways (Miller, 2013; Rosenblatt, 1978). Joining efforts to find approaches to teaching historical nonfiction in meaningful ways (Abrahamson & Carter, 1991; Kaplan, 2003; Milner & Milner, 2008; Morris, 2013), we argue that teachers can improve students’ disciplinary literacy skills within the context of studying historical nonfiction. Disciplinary literacy—the unique ways disciplinary experts read, write, and view texts—is an important component of comprehending and using historical nonfiction in both ELA and social studies. While we do acknowledge that ELA and social studies involve distinct disciplines, in this piece we want to highlight the commonalities between the two content areas and how the framework fosters the type of inquiry both ELA and social studies value.

Scholars argue that quality literature can be used to help students read deeply and develop literary interpretation and historical thinking (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). A disciplinary literacy approach to using historical nonfiction in social studies focuses on making sense of the past represented in the text and how the author used historical evidence to represent the past (Seixas, 1999). Perhaps unique to ELA, a disciplinary literacy approach to understanding historical nonfiction asks students to examine how authors craft texts to communicate knowledge about the historical moment,

place, or figure (Welsh, 2014). Taken together in ELA and social studies classes, disciplinary literacy asks students to consider how historical nonfiction helps them understand the period, people, and events featured as well as *the process* of how historians gather information from historical evidence, understand the past, and communicate their understanding with readers (Boyd & Howe, 2006; Levstik & Barton, 2010; Seixas, 1999; Wineburg, 2001). In social studies-history education, this *process* involves heuristics such as contextualizing, corroborating, and sourcing (Collingwood, 1946; VanSledright, 2004; Wineburg, 2001). Similar practices are often referred to as building context, intertextuality, and biographical criticism, respectively in ELA (Milner & Milner, 2008) (see Table 1). For consistency, here we use the terms affiliated with social studies.

As we have read others’ writing (Nokes, 2008) and considered our own research (Hinton et al., 2014), we have discovered teachers can use additional guidance concerning fostering disciplinary habits of mind. Our research indicates that a disciplinary literacy approach encourages students to engage with nonfiction in a way that allows them to consider discipline-specific tasks associated with understanding the past. Our studies of teachers and their approaches to teaching historical nonfiction offer us insights in this area. With this in mind, we would like to offer a three-part framework highlighting disciplinary practices such as contextualizing/building con-

text, corroborating/intertextuality, and sourcing/biographical criticism that ELA and social studies teachers can use when fostering students’ responses to historical nonfiction. This article introduces each part of the framework, using *Hitler Youth* (Bartoletti, 2005), a nonfiction text that profiles twelve young people affiliated with the Hitler Youth, as an example. We discuss *Hitler Youth* in two ways. We first illustrate how Bartoletti used the three habits of mind in her writing and then list ways in which middle level ELA and social studies teachers model these habits of mind for students.

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### Contextualizing/Building Context

Contextualizing is “an act of creating a spatial and temporal context for a historical event” (Wineburg, 1998, p. 322). *Hitler Youth* illustrates how the author uses this heuristic of contextualization in telling the individual stories of boys and girls who participated in the Hitler Youth or were af-

#### CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Question the Author (QtA) is a comprehension strategy that asks students to pose queries while reading a given text, helping to solidify their knowledge and challenge their understanding, rather than after reading. QtA, which is primarily used with nonfiction texts (but can be also used with fiction), engages students with the text to create deeper meaning by allowing students to critique the authors’ writing. Learn more in this strategy guide from ReadWriteThink.org.

<http://bit.ly/1EjKp04>

Lisa Storm Fink  
[www.ReadWriteThink.org](http://www.ReadWriteThink.org)

**Table 1.** Framework for Reading Historical Nonfiction and Fostering Historical Habits of Mind

Habits of Mind		Goals		Guiding Questions	Instructional Strategies
Social Studies-History	English	Social Studies-History	English		
Contextualizing	Building context	Identifying the past that the text represents	Understanding the historical period, people, and events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the setting (time, place, social and historical background) of the book?</li> <li>• What else was going on at the same time in terms of national and global contexts?</li> </ul>	~Quick write ~Timeline with dipity.com
Corroborating	Intertextuality	Questioning the validity of the information presented in the text about the past	Examining how different sources address the same topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do individual sources agree or disagree about the period, events, and key figures?</li> <li>• How does each source agree or disagree with your understanding of history?</li> </ul>	~Think-pair-share ~Discussion web
Sourcing	Biographical criticism	Challenging the text as historical artifact	Drawing conclusions about the author’s unique experiences and how they might have influenced the text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who wrote the book, when, and where?</li> <li>• Why did the author write the book?</li> <li>• What research did the author conduct to write the book?</li> <li>• How does the author’s work mirror what historians do?</li> <li>• How can the author’s approach to writing about the topic be imitated in our own nonfiction writing?</li> </ul>	~Questioning the author ~Read the author’s note ~Share relevant interviews and profiles of the author

fectured by it. While telling their stories, Bartoletti offers a fuller picture of the climate from which Hitler Youth emerged. She, for instance, contextualizes the story of Herbert Norkus, a fourteen-year-old boy who was killed during a street fight with Communist youth, in two ways. She first explains that Herbert joined the Hitler Youth enthusiastically and took the Nazi’s creed of self-sacrifice seriously, though initially his mother forbade him from joining because it was too dangerous. After her death, his father gave him permission because he hoped joining the group would “lift [Herbert’s] spirit, help him make new friends, and instill a sense of discipline” (Bartoletti, 2005, p.10).

Bartoletti then situates Herbert’s story within the historical context of the 1920s and early

1930s. In the sidebar, she explains, “During the 1920s and early 1930s, Communists and Nazis waged an undeclared civil war in Berlin’s streets and alleys as each party battled for political control,” and Herbert was one of the fourteen Hitler Youths who were killed in street fights between 1926 and 1932 (2005, p. 11). The youngest murder victim at the time, Herbert was seen as a martyr.

Bartoletti also begins the book with the following quote that highlights why Hitler considered this youth group important:

“I begin with the young,” said Hitler.

“We older ones are used up. . . . But my magnificent youngsters! Are there finer ones anywhere in the world? Look at all these men and boys! What material! With them I can make a new world” (p. 7).

After contextualizing the importance of the

organization through Hitler’s speech, she describes how the youth experienced a series of historical events, such as Hitler’s rise to power, the Holocaust, battles during World War II, the collapse of the Nazi Party, and the end of the war.

As Bartoletti illustrates, there are two levels of contextualization needed when reading historical nonfiction. The first involves understanding the local setting where stories take place. Two guiding questions can be asked to promote this level of contextualization: What is the geographic location and time where individual stories happened? And what important historical events took place in that setting? The second level involves developing an understanding of a broader scope of the historical period, and it is concerned with the big picture, where the local context is embedded (Reisman & Wineburg, 2008). For instance, a reading of *Hitler Youth* in this way prompts the following questions: What was happening in Germany and the rest of the world from 1932 to 1945? How does this big picture of the historical context affect the lives of individuals and events presented in the book? We argue that thinking contextually in such ways allows social studies and ELA readers to understand not only the historical events portrayed in the book, but also how and why the world represented in the book is the way it is.

There are instructional strategies teachers can use to determine and build students’ background knowledge of the period. For instance, using the questions in Table 1, teachers can ask students to discuss *Hitler Youth*’s setting as a local context. Addressing the national and global context would serve as an opportunity to discuss the outcomes of World War I such as the Treaty of Versailles and economic turmoil and anti-Semitism that prevailed in Germany at the time. The timeline at the end of *Hitler Youth* would be a great source for teachers to reference when discussing the geographical and temporal context of the book. Using a website such as Dipity, students can also work in groups to create a visual timeline of historical events in the book, which will allow them to organize the informa-

tion from the book chronologically and “make it easier to think about cause-and-effect relationships” (Levstik & Barton, 2010, p. 67).

## Corroborating with Multiple Genres/ Intertextuality

The second component of the framework accomplishes one central task: It encourages students to use multiple sources in multiple genres to corroborate information.

Bartoletti’s research and writing process mirrors the way historians corroborate sources, as she corroborated across multiple genres, including textbooks from the Third Reich, Hitler’s autobiography, and numerous documents and photographs at the Library of Congress. She traveled to Germany, visited places where historical events associated with the *Hitler Youth* took place, interviewed former *Hitler Youth* members, and read personal accounts (see her author’s note, pp. 161–162).

Similarly, teachers can help students corroborate texts like *Hitler Youth* with other sources. Primary source documents such as the photographs of events and people depicted in historical nonfiction for youth can assist with this. Noted children’s nonfiction author Deborah Hopkinson (2012) points out, “Looking at photographs, letters, or other documents not only can help students become familiar with primary sources and how authors use them but they enrich the understanding of history itself” (p. 15).

Students can also corroborate the events described in a book with those in other genres and review how individual texts agree or disagree

**As historians use multiple sources to get a better understanding of the past, teachers can instruct students on how to use nonfiction and other sources to corroborate versions of the same historical person, place, or event using strategies designed to promote the examination of multiple points of view such as discussion webs (Alvermann, 1991).**



about the events and the people featured (Boyd & Howe, 2006). As historians use multiple sources to get a better understanding of the past, teachers can instruct students on how to use nonfiction and other sources to corroborate versions of the same historical person, place, or event using

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strategies designed to promote the examination of multiple points of view such as discussion webs (Alvermann, 1991).

Coupling fiction with nonfiction is another way both social studies and English teachers can corroborate multiple texts in multiple genres (Baer, 2012). For instance, historical nonfiction can be read after students have enjoyed historical fiction to “offer a more in-depth look at the subject” (Camp, 2000, p. 401). On the other hand, historical nonfiction can serve as a great entry point to other sources (Levstik & Barton, 2010). For example, we found that *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2006) notes that the main character Liesel is in the Hitler Youth, but the purpose of the organization and the pervasiveness of its forced presence in the lives of German citizens is not abundantly clear. Thus, *Hitler Youth* makes vivid historical events, organizations, and people that are merely mentioned in *The Book Thief*. We posit that teachers, depending on their own objectives, should decide how they want to sequence historical nonfiction, as the genre is useful for either entering the study of historical fiction or extending it.

### Sourcing/Biographical Criticism

Throughout the framework, students become keenly aware that historical nonfiction is a product of an individual, an author who inherently has an interpretation of the past to convey. Sourcing, the final element in the framework, asks students to think about who authors are, how

authors tell stories about the past, and how authorship influences composition (VanSledright, 2004; Wineburg, 2001; Lamb, 2010). This type of historical thinking can be promoted by asking the following questions: Who wrote the book? When and where? Why did the author write the book? What research did the author conduct to write the book? These questions help students interpret and evaluate the text as historical artifact (Britt & Aglinskas, 2002). Answers can be found in profiles of the author and the back matter of historical nonfiction. Before assigning sections of *Hitler Youth*, teachers can ask students to read the back matter and acknowledgment page to find clues about sources Bartoletti consulted and to learn about how and where she conducted research. Students can also use this information to consider whether Bartoletti seems trustworthy and to ascertain her motivation for writing *Hitler Youth*.

The questioning the author (Beck & McKeown, 2002) strategy can also be used to introduce sourcing to students, especially those who view texts as “authorless forms of neutral information” (VanSledright, 2004, p. 231). This strategy can lay the groundwork for sourcing when used as an opportunity to “show students how to read text closely as if the author were there to be challenged and questioned” and to foster the “quality and depth of students’ responses to the author’s intent” (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011, p. 204).

### Final Thoughts

The Framework for Reading Historical Nonfiction can be used to help students understand historical nonfiction while considering three habits of mind highlighted in social studies and ELA. It can be modified for use in various middle grades and with multiple historical nonfiction selections. The framework invites students to begin to experience habits of mind that historians exercise while they inquire about the past, while discovering that the practices are vital to other disciplines as well.

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