

Why Author Studies?

Beyond seeing the author as a person—a writer with information and a point of view to share—author study (studying several books by one author) provides us with a rich yet manageable way of looking at the decisions an author makes when creating a work of nonfiction. These decisions are about content, word choice, illustration, and original thoughts and interpretations.

Thinking about how an author creates nonfiction raises many questions for young readers and writers to think about: After researching a topic, what information goes into the book? What doesn't? Why? How should the book begin in order to grab the reader's attention? How should it end in order to keep the reader thinking about the topic? What information is best introduced through pictures, photographs, graphs, or tables? What features like sidebars and primary sources would add interest to the page? In what ways are the author's books similar? How are they different? As students engage in author study they think about how an author answered these questions.

Not surprisingly, these same questions are highlighted in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The Standards emphasize reading informational text to determine key ideas and details, an author's point of view, how the author structures and crafts information, how new vocabulary is introduced, and how visual material works together with written text. It's a match! That is, by engaging in author studies students are also meeting many Common Core Standards for reading and understanding informational text.

This guide features books and suggested activities that can be used to jumpstart a nonfiction author study. This will open the door to critical inquiry and focused discussion of informational text. By aligning activities to Common Core State Standards, students learn content while becoming critical consumers of that content. That's powerful instruction.

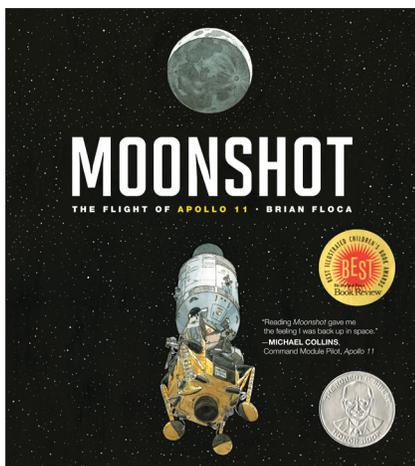
—Myra Zarnowski, Queens College, CUNY



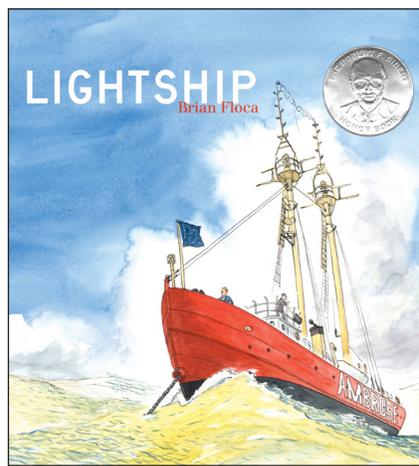
Launching Nonfiction Author Studies:
A focus for teaching the Common Core State Standards with books by
BRIAN FLOCA



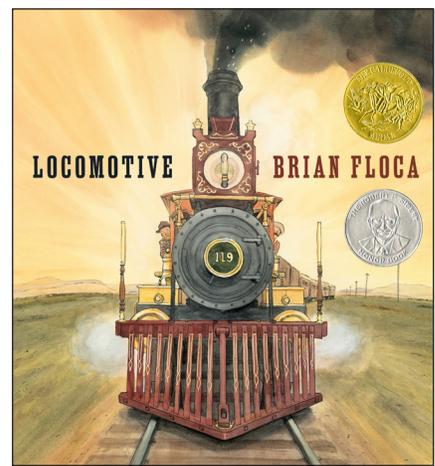
Books



*Moonshot:
The Flight of Apollo 11*



Lightship



Locomotive

Background Information

Brian Floca's books provide an exceptional blend of well-crafted free verse and detailed watercolor and ink illustrations. His books are not only enjoyable to read and savor, but also useful as mentor texts for studying how writing and illustration work together. *Lightship*, a description of ships that served as "floating beacons" in places where lighthouses could not be built, and *Moonshot*, a description of the Apollo 11 space flight, were both named Sibert Honor books for excellence in nonfiction. *Locomotive*, the author's newest title, has also received a 2014 Sibert Honor, an Orbis Pictus Honor, and is a 2014 Caldecott Medal winner. *Locomotive* combines detailed artwork and poetic text to describe a trip on the transcontinental railroad in its early years. Use these titles to show children a truly appealing way to present information.

Activities for Launching Your Author Study

CCSS Connection: The activity below draws attention to the integration of knowledge and ideas by having students carefully examine how a diagram contributes to and clarifies a text (RI.2–4.7)

1. Studying a Labeled Diagram. *Lightship* begins with a labeled diagram of the ship. Notice that the outside of the ship has been peeled away so that we can look inside. Use this diagram to find additional information about places that are mentioned and illustrated in the main part of the book. For each location below, tell what information is provided in the diagram and what information is provided in the text and illustrations. Complete the following chart as a class. Discuss how diagrams work together with written text and illustrations to help us understand key ideas. The examples below show that both the diagram and the text and illustrations contribute to our understanding of lightships. Use the reproducible on the next page to come up with even more examples.

ITEM/PLACE	ANSWER	INFORMATION IN DIAGRAM
Information in Diagram	The horn is above the deck. It is used when there is a fog. The sound is so loud it makes the ship shake.	The horn is located in the middle of the ship. It is between the two lanterns and above the engine room.
The light (lantern)	The lantern is bright enough to shine through the fog.	There are two lanterns. One is an extra, or auxiliary. A radio beacon antenna is attached to the top of each lantern.
The crew's quarters		
The pilot house where the helmsman steers the ship		
The anchor		
The area below deck where the engines and generators are located		

Challenge the students to make a diagram of an object that interests them. This could be an animal (elephant, whale, snake), plant (rose, pumpkin, tree), or an invention (bicycle, kite, lightbulb). Provide time for the research needed to complete this activity. There are also many examples of other labeled diagrams on the Internet to examine as models. Search Google Images and type in *labeled diagrams*. Encourage students to also write about the subject of their diagram, adding additional information.

CCSS Connection: The activities below focus on understanding key ideas and details (RI.1–4.2) and asking and answering questions to demonstrate understanding of a text (RI.1–3.1).

ITEM/PLACE

ANSWER

INFORMATION IN DIAGRAM



2. Key Ideas and Details. In *Lightship*, the author writes:

Here is a ship
That holds her place.

Ask students to explain what that means. Then have them give evidence from the text of what the ship *does* and *does not* do to hold her place. Discuss why it was important for a lightship to hold its place.

Share the Author’s Note at the end of the book, which tells why lightships were originally built and why they were later discontinued. What additional information is provided in the Author’s Note?

3. Hot Seat. Have one student pretend to be the captain of the lightship. That student takes the “hot seat” for questioning. Ask the other students to think up questions to use to interview the captain. At the beginning of the interview, the captain should introduce himself or herself. Following the Q&A period, have one student summarize the important information shared by the captain.

CCSS Connection: In the activity below, students carefully examine the book *Moonshot* to learn more about the craft and organization of nonfiction, paying attention to how different text features provide information (RI.1–4.5).

4. Examining the Craft and Structure of Nonfiction. After reading *Moonshot*, take time to examine how the author not only *informs* us about the Apollo 11 space mission, but also captures the *excitement* and *wonder* of the event. Look carefully at each of the features below and take notes on the next page about how the author uses that feature to inform and create a sense of excitement and wonder. Sample ideas to discuss are printed below.

Text Feature How the Feature Informs and Creates a Sense of Excitement and Wonder

Endpapers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Front endpapers provide an illustrated time line of the Apollo 11 mission, from rollout and launch to the astronauts’ successful return to Earth. Readers anticipate a start-to-finish narrative. •Back endpapers provide a great deal of additional information, including an explanation of what Neil Armstrong meant to say when he landed on the moon. Readers can certainly understand how during such an exciting time, Armstrong didn’t precisely say what he intended to.
Repetition of Words and Phrases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Repeated use of the phrases to describe the Moon provide a sense of excitement: High above/there is the Moon,/cold and quiet,/ no air, no life,/but glowing in the sky. •Repeated use of the word <i>click</i> appeals to our sense of hearing as we learn about how the astronauts dressed for their launch and later strapped themselves into their seats. This adds to the excitement. •Repeated use of the word <i>GO</i>, as each scientist at the Houston Mission Control approves of the launch. This adds to the excitement and anticipation about what will happen next.
Print	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Large print adds to the excitement of the event, as in these examples: •Countdown numbers get bigger as they approach ZERO. •LIFTOFF! in large, bold type emphasizes the excitement. •ROAR written in large, overlapping type gives us a sense of the loudness, which the author describes as shaking the air and the earth.
Color	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Illustrations of the Earth have a light, sunny background, while illustrations of the moon are dark and mysterious.

Text Feature How the Feature Informs and Creates a Sense of Excitement and Wonder

Endpapers	
Repetition of Words and Phrases	
Print	
Color	

5. Examining the Language of *Moonshot*. In this book, the author writes about three different settings—Earth, the Moon, and the spacecraft. Collect examples showing how he describes each setting by appealing to our senses of sight, sound, and smell. Add to the chart below:

Descriptions of Earth, Spacecraft, and the Moon

EARTH	SPACECRAFT	MOON
<p>Back to family, back to friends, to warmth, to light, to trees and blue water.</p>	<p>Here, where everything floats, it takes some skill to go to sleep. There are no beds or pillows, night or day. There is always, though, the hum of circuits, the whir of machines...</p>	<p>In the dust and stone Beneath their feet, No seed has ever grown, No root has ever reached...</p>