As teachers, administrators, youth workers, policymakers, and educational researchers, how we define nonfiction is important because it impacts how our students define and, ultimately, relate to nonfiction texts. At the start of their 2016 book *Reading Nonfiction: Notice and Note Stances, Signposts, and Strategies*, authors Kylene Beers and Robert E. Probst share survey data suggesting that the colloquial definition of nonfiction has shifted in recent years. Originally, the term was a designation used by librarians to simply mean not a novel or not imaginary. However, common responses from teachers (primarily grades 4–12) and students (across all grades) to an open-ended survey question about the definition of nonfiction included “‘information books,’ ‘true stories,’ ‘things that are real,’ and ‘not fake’” (p. 15).

Beers and Probst point out that the shift in defining nonfiction as “not fake” is troubling, particularly for adolescent and adult students. That is, a conflict emerges when the common definition of nonfiction reduces this vast category of writing to the idea of not fake or, even more disconcerting, true. The reduced definition implies that the task of reading nonfiction is to simply learn and absorb information, rather than to question and consider the information being presented.

But when we tell students that nonfiction means true, we inadvertently have excused them from the task of deciding if the text is accurate, if the author’s biases have skewed information, if new information now contradicts “old” information in that text or in our own thinking. (p. 16)

Beers and Probst call for educators to scaffold more meaningful experiences with nonfiction texts, and they offer their organized approach in *Reading Nonfiction* as an invitation for teachers to reshape their students’ experiences with nonfiction texts.

To begin this reshaping work, Beers and Probst offer a more nuanced definition of nonfiction that aims to push readers to take up a questioning stance: “Nonfiction is that body of work in which the author purports to tell us about the real world, a real experience, a real person, an idea, or a belief” (p. 21). This more nuanced definition exposes the otherwise easily overlooked potential biases of nonfiction authors or publications. It also opens the space for nonfiction readers to actively question texts, their own knowledge, and their evolving understanding of the world.

In actuality, the role of the reader of nonfiction texts is to be active, to challenge the text, and to invite the text to challenge him. We must read with an eye skeptical enough that we see in the text the places we must question the author’s assertions. But at the same time we must read with a mind open enough that we will be able to, when warranted, change our understandings—about the text, about ourselves, about the world around us. (p. 16)

Beers and Probst frame meaningful engagement with nonfiction texts as an intellectual standard that can “open [students] up to new possibilities and challenging ideas and that give[s] them the courage and resilience to change their minds when they see persuasive reasons to do so” (p. 33). The authors go on to offer tools and suggestions to help teachers support their students as critical and informed readers of nonfiction.

To help teachers guide nonfiction readers to “develop habits of mind that let [them] read with a skeptical eye and an open mind” (p. 72), Beers and Probst organize *Reading Nonfiction* across the categories of stances, signposts, and strategies. Each category is explored briefly later in this review. Directly addressing classroom teachers, the authors offer suggestions that are tailored to the complexities of nonfiction texts and modern classroom spaces. The book includes detailed classroom scenarios, sample discussion questions, organizational charts, informational callouts, and images of sample posters and student work. In addition, the book includes numerous QR codes and URLs that link to additional teaching materials. These online materials include templates that support strategies, teaching texts that support lessons, and videos that highlight these tools in action.
With all the concrete tools and examples shared throughout Reading Nonfiction, Beers and Probst also acknowledge the known and unknown challenges of pushing students to question and make relevant nonfiction reading. The authors invite classroom teachers to adapt the tools shared in Reading Nonfiction to their own teaching and learning contexts, content areas, and students. To this end, the authors remind teachers to consider developmentally appropriate scaffolds for their students, and include “talking with colleagues” questions to help teachers share and build on the ideas offered in the book within their local professional development networks.

**Nonfiction Is Vast and Demanding**

In spite of all that is done to make nonfiction texts look neat, navigable, and impartial, reading nonfiction is demanding and multidimensional.

The reality is that the reading of nonfiction places many demands upon the reader. Not only does it require that we be on the lookout for biases, but it often requires more background knowledge than the reading of fiction does. Many times that required knowledge is technical, specific, and complex. The vocabulary can be intimidating, the syntax can be daunting, and the concepts can be abstract. (p. 19)

Adding to this complexity, nonfiction texts are vast and can include letters, speeches, textbooks, trade books, fact sheets, articles, policy documents, websites, and more. Likewise, supports added to improve comprehension within one text (e.g., maps, figures, graphs, timelines, photographs) might be omitted or used differently in another text. Beers and Probst encourage teachers to consider the complexity of a nonfiction text—including ideas presented, structure, language, and prior knowledge required—as well as the potential interest and relevance for their students when selecting a text. Reading Nonfiction includes several appendixes with recommended nonfiction texts curated from Beers and Probst’s survey of teachers (grades 4–12).

When selecting texts to engage their students, the authors also stress the importance of leaving time for students to read and struggle with nonfiction texts in productive ways. “We want texts that kids can struggle with, rather than texts they must struggle through” (p. 47). That is, Beers and Probst encourage teachers to select texts that will require students to pause, consider, reflect, and discuss.

**The Importance of Stance**

Beers and Probst introduce their main section on stance with three questions they use to cultivate attentive nonfiction readers:

- What surprised me?
- What did the author think I already knew?
- What changed, challenged, or confirmed what I already knew? (p. 76)

Reading nonfiction with these big questions helps students develop habits of questioning that puts their own knowledge in conversation with the nonfiction text. Beers and Probst describe this as a mind-set that is open and receptive, but not gullible. “It encourages questioning the text but also questioning one’s assumptions, preconceptions, and possibly misconceptions” (p. 4). It also encourages productive dialogue about the text and students’ existing knowledge. This section of Reading Nonfiction goes into detail about each of the three questions, offering classroom scenarios, anchor chart samples, teaching texts, margin notes, categories for responses, worksheet suggestions, and self-reflection and conversation prompts.

**The Power of Signposts**

Signposts are markers that can “alert [students] to some significant moments in most nonfiction, those moments in which we need to think critically about claims an author makes” (p. 116). Beers and Probst offer five signposts to help readers analyze and evaluate a nonfiction text: “contrasts and contradictions, extreme or absolute language, numbers and stats, quoted words, and word gaps” (p. 116).

In addition to defining and offering detailed information on each of the five signposts, the authors offer examples of generalizable lessons, sample scaffolds, and tips to connect each signpost to reading skills. It is important to point out that these signposts and questioning stances (described previously) work together to help students discuss a text with more specificity. With this in mind, Beers and Probst suggest adding signpost-specific anchor questions, as well as discipline-specific questions. They offer suggestions on how to connect a signpost to an anchor question and invite their readers to build on their suggestions in ways that would best suit students’ needs and interests.

**The Role of Strategies**

In Reading Nonfiction, strategies are “those scaffolds that make the invisible thinking processes visible”
These strategies aim to develop relevance and mitigate confusions. The seven strategies explored in this book are “Possible Sentences, KWL 2.0, Somebody Wanted But So, Syntax Surgery, Sketch to Stretch, Genre Reformulation, and Poster” (p. 184).

Beers and Probst explain that these seven strategies are closely connected to skills and involve overlapping thinking processes, such as connecting, monitoring, inferring, and visualizing. The strategies require students to reread texts, and they encourage students to talk about what they have read in a variety of ways. The authors go on to explore each strategy through an assortment of potential activities, including tips for teaching each strategy, examples from students, and questions aimed at helping teachers use the strategies in a range of contexts. The strategies are presented in the book in the order of before reading, during reading, and after reading.

Open to Challenge and Change

Nonfiction texts are pervasive in our everyday world and are crafted to tell us something about real experiences. They can be subtle or direct, inclusive or exclusive, overly complex or subtly nuanced. Teaching students to be critical nonfiction readers with the responsibility to decide what information to accept, reject, or integrate into their own thinking and understanding of the world is vital. In addition to cultivating independent learners, Beers and Probst frame this task, and their conviction to creating opportunities for students to successfully struggle through difficult texts and complex ideas, as a democratic requirement. “If democracy functions best when there is a free and open exchange of thoughts so that the best thinking may rise to the top, habits of mind that lead to insularity are a threat” (p. 73). Reading Nonfiction offers an organized approach for teachers to reshape their students’ experiences with nonfiction, allowing their students to cultivate habits of mind that are open to challenge, change, and making informed decisions.

REFERENCE