Hybrid Text: An Engaging Genre to Teach Content Area Material Across the Curriculum

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Hybrid text is not only an engaging genre that integrates narrative and informational text but also a powerful tool to pique readers’ attention and inspire the curiosity to learn.

Stories capture my students’ attention and are engaging. However, I know that the Common Core State Standards state that nonfiction should be a major part of what is read in the classroom. Do I need to give up the stories my students love? (a fourth-grade teacher)

This elementary teacher describes a problem shared by many K–12 teachers in the United States. He understands that the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) encourage teachers to use narrative and informational text to teach content area material across the curriculum. He struggles, however, with incorporating both kinds of text. Like him, many teachers have shared with us their difficulty and frustration with finding, much less using, informational text to complement teaching narrative concepts like story structure, figurative language, characterization, simile, and metaphor because these concepts are more commonly associated with narrative rather than informational text. Other teachers express frustration, even confusion, at finding and using narrative text to help teach informational topics like fractions and geometric shapes in mathematics, world history and cultural diversity in social studies, and water cycles and ecosystems in science, just to name a few.

With these teachers in mind, the purpose of this article is to introduce hybrid text as an engaging genre that artfully integrates narrative and informational text and is a powerful tool to teach content area material across the curriculum. We begin by situating hybrid text within the Common Core’s Anchor Standards for Reading. Next, we describe how hybrid texts integrate narrative and informational text. Then, we identify design features and discuss potentials of hybrid text and share suggested hybrid texts in mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts. To continue, we share instructional strategies that might be considered when using hybrid text for instruction. We conclude with final thoughts.

Anchor Standards for Reading and the Common Core

Many states have adopted the Common Core, which is a set of research-based, internationally benchmarked standards designed to prepare K–12 students to be college or career ready upon graduation from high school. The Common Core includes 10 Anchor Standards for Reading that expect students at all grade levels to read both narrative and informational text. As students get older, these Anchor Standards emphasize informational text over narrative text. In fact, the Common Core expects that by 12th grade, students should spend 70% of their time reading informational text and 30% reading narrative text. This increase in reading informational text is not just in reading class but throughout the entire school day. To help build up to this expectation, the amount of informational text required increases each year, starting with fourth grade, where the amount of in-

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formational and narrative text is at 50% each. Hence, teachers at all grade levels are challenged to find ways to incorporate a large amount of informational text into their classrooms and their instruction.

One reason why this is challenging for teachers is the imbalance in emphasis between narrative and informational text. Another reason is that this imbalance fails to recognize that much children’s and adolescents’ literature already effectively integrates both narrative and informational text. Much narrative text includes important informational text in author notes or historical notes. Biographies are a good example; many biographies are told through a narrative form but also include an afterword that describes additional interesting and factual information about the lives and times of real people. Moreover, narrative text provides a powerful context for learning complex content area material.

Narrative text can also provide a real-world context for learning content area material. This partially explains why the National Science Teachers Association and the National Council of Social Studies both recognize and support the use of narrative text to teach content area material across the curriculum. Both organizations support award programs that recognize outstanding trade books to teach science and social studies (see National Council of Social Studies, n.d.; National Science Teachers Association, 2016).

Fortunately, there has been a proliferation of texts in an engaging genre that creatively integrates narrative and informational text across the curriculum. Today, this genre is commonly referred to as hybrid text.

Hybrid Text
A hybrid text is a single text with a dual purpose: to integrate narrative and informational text (Donovan & Smolkin, 2002). It presents important information about a specific topic using narrative text as the primary means of expression (Maloch & Bomer, 2013)—for example, to teach scientific information (Ebbers, 2002). A hybrid text is also referred to as an informational storybook (Leal, 1992), a blended or mixed-genre text (Elster & Hanauer, 2002), a multigenre text (Flurkey & Goodman, 2004), or a postmodern picture book (Pantaleo, 2014; Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008).

Hybrid text is not a new genre. Leal (1992) investigated first-, third-, and fifth-grade students’ talk about three types of text during peer discussions: narrative storybook, expository information book, and informational storybook. The informational storybook was defined as a text that “blends characteristics of the storybook and the informational book” (p. 314). Findings indicated that, when discussing the informational storybook or hybrid text, students across all three grade levels “sustained more interest on the text topic, used speculation more frequently, and focused on extratextual topics more than the other two types of texts” (p. 329). Moreover, Zarnowski (2003) identified several characteristics of hybrid text, including sidebars, captions, timelines, and historical and author notes, and noted that they significantly enhance literacy learning, particularly reading and writing biographies in social studies.

Although not new, hybrid text is certainly an engaging genre (Calkins & Tolan, 2010). Many imaginative and artfully crafted hybrid texts have been published, including The Bumblebee Queen by April Pulley Sayre, Big Blue Whale by Nicola Davies, and Energy Island: How One Community Harnessed the Wind and Changed Their World by Allan Drummond in science; If the Earth…Were a Few Feet in Diameter by Joe Miller and If: A Mind-Bending New Way of Looking at Big Ideas and Numbers by David J. Smith in math; and Sewing Stories: Harriet Powers’ Journey from Slave to Artist by Barbara Herkert and The Mary Celeste: An Unsolved Mystery From History by Jane Yolen in social studies.

One of the most important aspects of hybrid text is its potential to support both aesthetic and efferent responses or stances to literature. In her transactional view of the reading process, Rosenblatt (1994) stated that the act of reading invites readers to respond to text along a continuum ranging from aesthetic to efferent responses.

The term aesthetic essentially means to perceive or understand the beauty of something, like a piece
of art, a musical composition, or the design of a building. Efferent responses focus on information gathering. Thus, readers take an aesthetic stance when they read a text for the purpose of enjoying text features such as figurative language, text structures, symbolism, images, vocabulary, and inferential thinking. Readers take an efferent stance when they read a text with a focus on information, such as understanding a process, analyzing a product, evaluating a system, and solving a problem. By integrating narrative and informational text, hybrid text enables readers to take both stances in a single reading.

At the same time, one of the most interesting aspects of hybrid text is the author’s and illustrator’s use of design features.

**Design Features of Hybrid Text**

A hybrid text is a single text that creatively weaves together narrative and informational text using a variety of design elements such as marginalia, text boxes, and miniature embedded illustrations. In many ways, hybrid texts can be characterized as multimodal texts because they present information across a variety of modes, including visual images, design elements, written language, and other semiotic resources (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). These texts vary and can include picture books, informational text, and chapter books as well as novels, especially graphic novels. Kress stated that “one of the most recognizable changes in the contemporary novel is the inclusion of visual images and elaborate graphic design features in addition to written text” (as quoted in Serafini & Blasingame, 2012, p. 145).

These multimodal texts convey meaning through multiple systems of meaning, or modes, including “visual images, typography, graphic design elements, and written text (Kress, 2010)” (Serafini & Blasingame, 2012, p. 145). In short, hybrid text integrates language, illustration, and design. The following are seven design features used in hybrid text.

**Font.** Traditionally, the term font is often associated with a text’s typeface, that is, how the letters of written text are designed. Fonts vary depending on characteristics such as height, width, angle, weight, and style. *Python* by Christopher Cheng (2013) is composed in two fonts to highlight the difference between the narrative and informational text. The narrative text uses a larger font set in straight lines, and the informational text uses a smaller font that curves across the page.

Specifically, *Python* is a beautiful picture book that describes with rich language and beautiful illustrations many of the important characteristics and behaviors of a diamond python, a snake indigenous to the Australian bush. The narrative text tells the story of the python waking, smelling the air, and prowling the bush looking for food. After several missed attempts, the python successfully pounces, constrains her prey, and digests her meal slowly, plentifully, and secretly. Later, the python coils around her eggs and waits for hatchlings to appear. Once born, they, like their mother, will spend their lives smelling, watching, and waiting.

In *Python*, the informational text effortlessly follows the narrative, letting the story of one diamond python lead the way. In this way, the informational text enriches the narrative with important and fascinating content area material about the life of a diamond python. Interestingly enough, the curving design of the informational text effectively resembles the slithering movement of the python throughout the story.

*Volcano Rising* by Elizabeth Rusch, *Flight of the Honey Bee* by Raymond Huber, *Bilby: Secrets of an Australian Marsupial* by Edel Wignell, and Big Red Kangaroo by Claire Saxby are additional hybrid texts that use this same design feature. In particular, Big Red Kangaroo explicitly alerts readers to pay attention to the presence of two different kinds of text by stating, “Look up the pages to find out all about kangaroo things. Don’t forget to look at both kinds of words—this kind and this kind” (Saxby, 2013, p. 30).

**Motif.** Simply stated, motif is a single repeated design. Thomas Jefferson Builds a Library by Barb Rosenstock (2013) is a fascinating hybrid text (picture book) that uses motif as a design feature. It describes an important character trait of Thomas Jefferson, one often overlooked by historians and history textbooks: He loved to read and collect books. He loved both so much that his accumulated collection over the years helped create and establish the world’s largest library at the time, the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

From a narrative perspective, this hybrid text provides a fascinating biography of Jefferson, his life with books, and his passion for reading, collecting, and sharing his library with others. From an informational perspective, it uses the motif of an opened miniature book with a two-page spread inserted on each page. Each miniature book provides
interesting information about Jefferson and his love of books. These miniature books also provide family information, historical information, and quotes from Jefferson and from other people at the time, including slaves, congressional representatives, political opponents, family members, and international diplomats. Another hybrid text that uses motif is The Fantastic Undersea Life of Jacques Cousteau by Dan Yaccarino. In this instance, the motif is a circle on each page that represents a water bubble in the sea. Each bubble contains historical information, especially quotes from Jacques Cousteau about his passion for the sea. Play, Mozart, Play! by Peter Sís is yet another hybrid text that uses motif as a design feature.

**Marginalia.** Marginalia are written text, symbols, illuminations, scribbles, and comments in the margins of a text. Starry Messenger: Galileo Galilei by Peter Sís (1996) is an award-winning picture book that uses this design feature to introduce the famous scientist and mathematician. The narrative text depicts the life and times of Galileo as a scientist, mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and physicist. The book highlights Galileo’s refusal to accept conventional thinking of the time and his telescopic observations of the stars, which proved that Earth is not the center of the universe but, rather, Earth revolves around the sun. The informational text is provided through marginalia, that is, information provided in the margins of each page.

In Starry Messenger, each page is actually a two-page spread, with illustration covering approximately three fourths of the complete page. The remaining space is a single column running from the top of the page to the bottom, replete with important historical information both in language and pictures about Italy, Galileo’s country; Pisa, Galileo’s birthplace; the Benedictine Monastery of Santa Maria di Vallombrosa and the University of Pisa, Galileo’s schools; and a hydrostatic balance, a practical thermometer, a geometric and military compass, and the first astronomical telescope, Galileo’s invented scientific instruments. Like other hybrid texts that use marginalia as a design feature, readers could read the text of Starry Messenger without reading the marginalia and it would make complete sense. However, with the information presented in the margins, the reader’s understanding and knowledge of the topics addressed is enhanced. Other hybrid texts that use this design feature are Snowflake Bentley by Jacqueline Briggs Martin, No Fear for Freedom: The Story of the Friendship 9 by Kimberly P. Johnson, The 5,000-Year-Old Puzzle: Solving a Mystery of Ancient Egypt by Claudia Logan, and Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night by Joyce Sidman.

**Poetry.** Poetry is a distinctive narrative type of writing. A traditional form of poetry is haiku. Haiku Hike, written and illustrated by fourth-grade students of St. Mary’s Catholic School in Mansfield, Massachusetts (2005), is a delightful hybrid text that tells the story of two young friends who decide to go on a hike to observe and photograph nature. Once hiking, they realize that they left the camera behind, so they decide to write in researcher notebooks about the interesting things that they see along the way. They write haiku, a traditional form of Japanese poetry, and field notes, a kind of writing often used by scientists while making observations of a phenomenon. This hybrid text highlights both genres.

In Haiku Hike, the narrative text includes a collection of haiku poems about waterfalls, mighty oak trees, spring peepers, wildflowers, moose, and dragonflies that the friends see and write about along the way. The informational text includes field notes that provide interesting facts about each. Together, this hybrid text integrates not only narrative and informational text but also science and English language arts through both genres. Other hybrid texts that use poetry as a design feature are Comets, Stars, the Moon, and Mars by Douglas Florian and One Leaf Rides the Wind by Celeste Mannis.

**Symbolism.** A Drop Around the World by Barbara Shaw McKinney (1998) uses lyrical text to tell the story of the water cycle. It describes how the water cycle supports life everywhere through the journey of a raindrop as it travels around the world, in the sky, on the land, under the ground, and in the sea. On this journey, water is also described in terms of changing forms: liquid, solid, and vapor.

The informational text is provided through symbolism, a design feature in which an object is used to represent an important idea. A Drop Around the World incorporates a variety of symbols to add important information to the narrative text. These symbols include a hot-air balloon to indicate that raindrops are world travelers, a snowflake to indicate that raindrops turn from liquid to solid when temperatures fall below 32°F (0°C), a cloud to indicate how different clouds are made in the atmosphere, an unbalanced scale to indicate that water is heavy, a leaf to indicate...
how water keeps Earth green and healthy, and a rainbow to indicate how water can bend light. Symbols appear at the end of lines of text to enhance reader understanding of what is happening to the raindrop at different phases of the water cycle and the important science behind it. At the conclusion of the story, the symbols are presented with an explanation and information about what they stand for. This invites the reader to use this important reference while reading to enhance understanding and knowledge of the content.

_The Great Wall of China_ by Leonard Everett Fisher is another hybrid text that uses this design feature.

**Illustrative Chronology.** _The Pilot and the Little Prince: The Life of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry_ by Peter Sís (2014) is a beautiful biography that celebrates the remarkable author of _The Little Prince_, one of the world’s most beloved books. The narrative text describes the life and times of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry from his birth in France to his last courageous flight, from which he mysteriously never returned. In between, he lived an adventurous life always centered on aviation. Among other things, as a young man, Saint-Exupéry learned to fly and then became a pilot. Later, he was hired by a commercial airline to deliver mail. In this job, he created new mail routes in South America and eventually became a pilot in World War II. In 1943, _The Little Prince_ was published.

The informational text is shared through illustrative chronology. This design feature presents a colorful chronology of important events, information, and people related to the narrative text. Many illustrations are accompanied by single captions, whereas others have multiple illustrations and captions connected to the text. Still others are full-page single illustrations without text.

Other works by Peter Sís also make use of illustrative chronology, such as _The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain, The Tree of Life: A Book Depicting the Life of Charles Darwin, Naturalist, Geologist, and Thinker, Tibet Through the Red Box_, and _Follow the Dream: The Story of Christopher Columbus_.

**Fun Facts and Intriguing Questions.** _Matter: See It, Touch It, Taste It, Smell It_ by Darlene R. Stille (2004) is an introduction to the scientific concept of matter. It describes several characters engaged in real-life situations in which matter is involved in some form or function. Through these situations, readers learn what matter is, the three kinds of matter, and the changing states of matter.

Accompanying the narrative text are fun facts located at the bottom of each page. These facts provide entertaining snippets of additional important information about matter, and they are extended at the end of the book with a glossary of important vocabulary words and Matters of Fact, even more snippets that significantly extend reader understanding of the concept of matter. _Engineering the ABC’s: How Engineers Shape Our World_ by Patty O’Brien Novak, another hybrid text that effectively uses this design feature, stretches significantly beyond fun facts and poses intriguing questions for the reader.

**Multiple Data Sources.** _Mammals Who Morph: The Universe Tells Our Evolution Story_ by Jennifer Morgan (2006) is a narrative text that is narrated by the universe. Through the voice of the universe, the book describes the evolution of mammals on Earth before there were any humans. It also describes a time when unique animals, such as rabbit-sized camels, elephants with teeth on the tips of their trunks, and baby bats who cling to their mothers as they fly, all roamed the planet. Over time, humans joined mammals and evolved with them into a very imaginative species. Today, humans continue their evolutionary adventure but must be careful to take care of planet Earth.

_Mammals Who Morph_ is packed with informational text that generously complements the narrative text through multiple data sources. One data source is a beautiful set of illustrations that are visually appealing and bring the narrative to life. This hybrid text also includes running timelines that appear at the top of each page and timelines at the bottom of each page that identify important science concepts related to evolution. It also includes a richly informative section at the end of the narrative that expands on various concepts and includes colorful photographs for emphasis. Finally, it includes a glossary and suggests related books for children, teachers, and parents; recommended videos; and other resources. Two other books by Jennifer Morgan, _Born With a Bang: The Universe Tells Our Cosmic Story_ and _From Lava to Life: The Universe Tells Our Earth Story_, are other examples of hybrid texts that use this design feature.

In sum, hybrid text is an engaging genre because it creatively and artfully integrates language, illustration, and design. It is also an effective tool to introduce students to a variety of unique text design features as well as to use with instructional strategies to support literacy development and teach content area material across the curriculum.
Instructional Strategies

It is valuable for readers to understand the characteristics of exemplary hybrid texts across the curriculum. Using a variety of instructional strategies with hybrid text provides teachers with opportunities to engage students in purposeful reading, writing, thinking, and learning. Here, we share some of our favorite strategies to use with hybrid text. Because hybrid text blends fact with fiction, these strategies work especially well. Not only does each strategy promote understanding of hybrid text, but each strategy also promotes student reflection on efferent and aesthetic responses to the text being read.

What’s Interesting and What’s Important? (see Figure 1) helps readers distinguish between interesting and important information. This strategy is especially valuable for hybrid text because both narrative and informational text are represented. As readers deconstruct the hybrid text, they may find some information interesting. Others may feel the same information is important. Still others may feel that the information is both interesting and important. It is beneficial for readers to understand that each bit of information may vary in how important and how interesting it is.

Wordstorming to Anticipate Content (Allen, 2008) is a popular instructional strategy to support academic vocabulary development. Adapting this strategy for hybrid text provides a tool to analyze words with both a narrative and an informational lens. This variation (see Figure 2) invites students to record in the appropriate boxes both important concepts related to the narrative text and important informational words used in the text.

For example, students might record words such as *metaphor* for M, *characterization* for C, and *plot* for P when focusing on narrative concepts. Terms such as *metamorphosis* for M, *chrysalis* for C, and *photosynthesis* for P may be recorded when considering the information given. Once recording is complete, readers can reflect on both narrative and informational words to reflect on both their efferent and aesthetic responses to the text.

Figure 1
What’s Interesting and What’s Important?

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This reading strategy invites you to record informational text you find interesting, important, or both, as well as features of narrative text you find appealing, enjoyable, and meaningful.

While reading, jot down in the left column information that you find interesting, and in the right column, information you consider important. Use the section at the bottom to record information that you consider both interesting and important. Code what you have recorded with a (N) for narrative text and an (I) for informational text. Share your findings in discussion groups.

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*On the back:* After participating in discussion groups, spend time writing a reflection on what you have learned from reading hybrid text as a genre that integrates both narrative and informational text.
A Narrative, Informational, or Design Inquiry Bag helps students take an inquiry stance on reading narrative and informational text. Students organize themselves in small groups of three or four. The group shares a stack of index cards or sticky notes. While reading, students jot down inquiry questions they have about the text. This strategy guides students to consider how different types of texts promote different types of questioning, making it perfect to use with hybrid text.

For example, students may pose questions when considering narrative texts, such as “Why did the author select this setting for the story?” or “What other ways could the main character(s) have solved the problem?” Questions can also focus on information, such as “How is the water that we drink today the same water that dinosaurs drank millions of years ago?” or “Why is the metric system often considered better to use than the standard system for calculating conversions?” or “How are historical events different when told by the conquered rather than the conqueror?” Still other questions can focus on design elements, such as the following:

- Why did the author write this text as a hybrid text?
- How might this hybrid text be different if it had been written only as a narrative, a poem, a play, or even a wordless picture book?

**Figure 2**
Wordstorming With Hybrid Texts

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Last, write and share your reflections on what you have learned from hybrid text as a genre that integrates narrative and informational text.
■ What was the thinking behind the illustrator’s placement of images on the page?
■ Why was some art set on single pages and other art on two-page spreads?
■ Why did the illustrator use watercolor instead of a different medium?
■ How might this text be different if the illustrator had used a different medium?

After reading and creating several cards or notes, students put their cards or sticky notes in the inquiry bag. One at a time, students select a card or note (not their own), read it aloud to the group, and use it to facilitate a discussion that focuses on answering the question.

Some Final Thoughts
Not only are hybrid texts engaging, but they also offer new potentials for learning across the curriculum. Instead of seeing narrative and informational text as mutually exclusive, hybrid text treats them as mutually supportive. From this perspective, readers can view literary and informational texts as symbiotic, not separate. This symbiosis builds on natural curiosity and functions as an opportunity for inquiry.

Gilles et al. (2001) stated that “juxtaposing fiction and nonfiction builds on the natural curiosity of students. The fictional accounts draw readers into the story while the nonfiction texts add facts and depth to students’ understanding” (p. 579). In short, hybrid texts invite readers to take different but complementary stances on a single text.

Dear Mr. Blueberry by Simon James (1996) is a good example. This text is the story of a young girl and her teacher, who write letters back and forth about a whale the girl has discovered in her backyard pond. In the first letter, the girl asks her teacher to send information about whales because she fears it is hurt. In his reply, the teacher says that whales live in salt water, not ponds, and therefore she probably did not see a whale. The girl’s next letter informs him that she has put salt water in the pond to help the whale but worries that the whale is lost. The teacher responds, noting that whales do not get lost; they always know where they are in the ocean. They continue to correspond about the whale until the girl informs her teacher that she went to the beach, saw Arthur (the whale), said she loved him, and told him the teacher loved him, too.

This picture book is an exemplary hybrid text. The girl’s letters tell a wonderful story about her imaginative (but real to her) encounter with a whale. They are filled with emotion, empathy, and intrigue. The teacher’s letters communicate important information about whales, including their habitats, abilities, appetites, and behaviors. Together, the story beautifully and artfully illustrates how the young girl seamlessly integrates the literary and the informational into a rich, interwoven reading, writing, and learning experience. We hope hybrid texts will enable other teachers and students to do the same.

REFERENCES

TAKE ACTION!
1. Ask students what the term hybrid means and what they know about hybrid texts.
2. Select a hybrid text to use as an exemplar.
3. Read the hybrid text with students. While reading, have students note special design features of the text.
4. Share other types of hybrid text with students and invite students to group them by design features shared in this article.
5. Ask students to draw inferences and conclusions as they learn about different types of hybrid text.
6. Invite students to create their own hybrid texts.


**LITERATURE CITED**


**MORE TO EXPLORE**

**Other Suggested Hybrid Texts**

**English Language Arts**

- *The Pot That Juan Built* by Nancy Andrews-Goebel
- *Mark Twain and the Queens of the Mississippi* by Cheryl Harness
- *No Bears* by Meg McKinlay

**Mathematics**

- *Counting Is for the Birds* by Frank Mazzola, Jr.
- *One Less Fish* by Kim Michelle Toft and Allan Sheather

**Science**

- *The Tarantula Scientist* by Sy Montgomery
- *What’s the Matter in Mr. Whiskers’ Room?* by Michael Elsohn Ross
- *I Is for Idea: An Inventions Alphabet* by Marcia Schonberg
- *Song of the Water Boatman and Other Pond Poems* by Joyce Sidman
- *Butterfly Eyes and Other Secrets of the Meadow* by Joyce Sidman
- *Winter Bees and Other Poems of the Cold* by Joyce Sidman
- *An Egret’s Day* by Jane Yolen

**Social Studies**

- *The Other Mozart: The Life of the Famous Chevalier de Saint-George* by Hugh Brewster
- *The Wright Brothers* by Pamela Duncan Edwards
- *Jet Plane: How It Works* by David Macaulay
- *The Queen’s Progress: An Elizabethan Alphabet* by Celeste Davidson Mannis
- *Amelia Earhart: The Legend of the Lost Aviator* by Shelley Tanaka