A group of fourth-grade students reads *Coolies* (Yin, 2001), a fictional picture book about two Chinese brothers who help to build the U.S. transcontinental railroad. When the group discusses the book with their teacher, it becomes apparent that some of the students do not fully comprehend the narrative because they know little about the building of the transcontinental railroad or the lives of 19th-century Chinese immigrants. Here is the same scene but with one difference. Now the teacher reads aloud sections of two informational texts, *Full Steam Ahead: The Race to Build a Transcontinental Railroad* (Blumberg, 1995) and *Chinese Immigrants 1850–1900* (Olson, 2001), before assigning *Coolies* and encourages students to compare and contrast them with the fictional text. In the second scenario, the informational texts support students’ comprehension of the fictional text in three ways: They build background knowledge, develop text-related vocabulary, and increase motivation to explore the topic under discussion.

Research has demonstrated the extent to which the comprehension of students in general, and English-language learners in particular, is affected by their degree of background knowledge, vocabulary, and motivation (Garcia, 2003; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). The level of those three prerequisites for comprehension can be improved by teaching units of study that contain fictional and informational books on the same topic. Paired, such texts (often known as twin texts) are widely used in U.S. schools. Other articles have explored instructional activities related to such pairings, yet little has been written about how units of study that contain fictional and informational texts on the same topic are uniquely suited to scaffolding and extending students’ comprehension (Camp, 2000).

**Background knowledge, vocabulary, and motivation**

Research has shown that comprehension improves when students have appropriate background knowledge that they can connect to the text they are reading (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Block & Pressley, 2002; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). When considering the results of this research on the relationship between background knowledge and comprehension, it is important for teachers to think about not only how to activate students’ background knowledge prior to reading new texts but also how to supply such knowledge for students who may be unfamiliar with the topic discussed in a particular text. Units of study that contain fictional and informational texts on the same topic address both of these instructional concerns: Exploring informational texts prior to reading fictional texts on the same topic activates background knowledge for students with prior knowledge of the topic and builds it for students without prior knowledge. Use of informational text to build background knowledge for literacy learning in general, rather than solely for the reading of fiction, has been explored by researchers concerned with identifying effective instructional practices for urban schools (e.g., Moss, 2004).

Vocabulary, like background knowledge, affects comprehension (McKeown & Beck, 2004; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). However, research has shown that in order for vocabulary instruction to have
an effect on comprehension, students need to explore a new word in a variety of contexts (McKeown & Beck; Mezynski, 1983; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Discussing the meaning of the same word in this way enables students to formulate a nuanced, recallable understanding of the word’s meaning (McKeown & Beck). Unfortunately, much vocabulary instruction aimed at improving comprehension is ineffective because it examines the word being taught only in the context of a single text (Beck & McKeown, 2002).

Units of study that contain fictional and informational texts on the same topic help teachers avoid that instructional pitfall by enabling students to explore new vocabulary in multiple contexts: A new word first encountered in an informational text may be encountered again in a related informational or a fictional text on the same topic. Moreover, informational and fictional texts on the same topic often use synonymous or even identical words to convey slightly different shades of meaning, further enhancing the depth of students’ vocabulary by exposing them to the different facets of a particular word or group of words.

Like vocabulary and background knowledge, motivation has been shown to be a crucial factor in students’ comprehension (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). The more motivated students are to read a particular text, the more likely they are to attempt to understand the text’s meaning (Guthrie, 2003). However, motivating students to read genres they are not interested in can be difficult. Some students prefer to read informational text, and some prefer to read fictional text (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). Units of study that contain fictional and informational texts on the same topic have the potential to motivate students to read more than one genre or type of book. When the two texts are brought together, students can be initially encouraged to explore a topic in their favored genre and in the genre they tend to avoid. In other words, a student who is interested in facts might read an informational text on a particular topic before reading a novel about it; another who prefers narrative might do the reverse, moving from a novel to an informational text on the same topic. In each case, reading preferences and interest in a particular genre create the initial purpose and momentum for reading, and the common topic acts as a bridge to the other less immediately compelling genre, which the student might end up appreciating more deeply.

In the context of read-alouds, bringing together fictional and informational texts on the same topic may motivate children to listen and think more attentively. Children interested in informational texts seem more likely to pay careful attention to a fictional text read with a comparable informational text than to a fictional text read on its own, and children more interested in fictional texts seem more likely to pay careful attention to an informational text read with a comparable fictional text than to an informational text read on its own. In effect one genre provides a bridge to another one in instruction that combines both texts. The resulting fluid movement between genres helps children become more sophisticated and diverse readers who are prepared to encounter a variety of genres of discourse in school, home, and eventually the working world.

The possibilities and risks of intertextuality

It can be easy to teach students about the connections between fictional and informational texts on the same topic, but it is also important to explore the differences between the two genres. Teaching these differences helps to prevent students from conflating the two genres and mixing up fact and fiction. At the same time such comparison provides a springboard for more advanced explorations of artistry. Children who have heard Two Bad Ants (Van Allsburg, 1988), a fictional text, as well as The Life and Times of the Ant (Micucci, 2003), an informational text, are prepared to discuss how the fictional ants are both different from and similar to the real ones. Inevitably, such discussions of how authors shape facts to produce coherent fiction and informational text can lead to sophisticated discussions of craft. The disjunction between informational and fictional texts on the same topic and the gaps between truth and artifice (as well as synchronicity) provide rich ground for developing students’ higher order comprehension abilities.

As long as teachers keep in mind the differences between fictional and informational texts as well as the similarities, they can avoid the problem of using fiction to teach scientific and historical facts. In the example of Van Allsburg’s fictional
text and Micucci’s informational text about ants, the latter is used to teach children how ants actually behave and the former to teach how authors shape and change facts about the natural world to create meaningful fiction. Done carefully, with attention paid to connections and disjunctions, the comparison between the two texts enriches students’ understanding of both genres; done hastily, with attention paid only to connections, the comparison runs the risk of misinforming young children about the true nature of ants.

Study units for older readers

In grades 3 and above, fictional and informational picture books can be used with novels and longer informational texts to form compelling, differentiated units of study. Such units are compelling in that readers of many different levels find picture books fascinating, and differentiated in that picture books (more than nonillustrated texts) are often accessible to readers at many levels. These units differ from so-called text sets in their inclusion of fictional and informational text.

Example 1—social history

An upper grade study unit on the U.S. Underground Railroad might include the following kinds of texts.

- Informational picture books: The Underground Railroad (Bial, 1999); If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad (Levine, 1993)
- Fictional picture books: Under the Quilt of Night (Hopkinson, 2002); Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky (Ringgold, 1992)
- A longer informational text: Get on Board: The Story of the Underground Railroad (Haskins, 1997)

Here the informational and fictional picture books build the background knowledge, vocabulary, and motivation for reading the longer informational text, which many students might find daunting without the initial context-building activities of the picture books.

Example 2—natural history

An upper grade study unit on the natural history topic dolphins might include the following kinds of texts.

- Informational picture books: Encantado: Pink Dolphin of the Amazon (Montgomery 2002); Dolphins (James, 2002); Is a Dolphin a Fish: Questions and Answers About Dolphins (Berger & Berger, 2002)

As in Example 1, the informational and fictional picture books build the background knowledge, vocabulary, and motivation for reading a longer work, in this case a novel. Embedding the study of novels and longer informational texts in a rich context of high-quality informational and fictional picture books has the potential to deepen older students’ understanding of complex texts and to make texts accessible that could bewilder students with insufficient background knowledge, vocabulary, and motivation.

Extending the dialogue between fact and fiction

Fictional and informational texts on the same topic are like two parts of a whole picture: The former offer a more personal, subjective, and affective perspective, and the latter offer a more public, objective, and factual perspective. Fiction has been celebrated for its capacity to illuminate human identity and feelings, while informational texts have been recognized for their ability to provide knowledge of the natural and social world (Duke, 2000; Weinstein, 2003). When teachers focus these two very different lenses on the same topic, they offer a more holistic view of a given subject and provide a wider range of potential hooks or entry points for student engagement. A highly flexible format of instruction, adaptable to a wide variety of content areas and grade levels, units of study that contain fictional and informational texts on the same topic can support students’ comprehension by helping to build their background knowledge,
vocabulary, and motivation. Ultimately, though, it will be the quality of the instructional practices designed to compare and contrast the two types of texts in such units (not just the juxtaposition of those texts) that improves students’ understanding of fact and fiction.

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References

Children's books cited

Teaching Tips submissions should be sent to The Reading Teacher, International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139, USA. See instructions for authors at www.reading.org. Teaching Tips should be brief, with a single focus on the classroom.