



# Informational Text for Young Learners

## What Is Informational Text?

Four- to eight-year children are hardwired to explore our diverse and fascinating world, and informational text (IT) is key in helping them do that. IT can be defined as **text whose primary purpose is to convey information**. It exists in print, oral, audio, visual, and digital forms; it can be as short as a tweet or as lengthy as an encyclopedia. Note that IT is not synonymous with nonfiction. Nonfiction is any text that is true, such as a person's diary entry, whereas IT is true text whose primary purpose to convey information.

There are many different types of IT. This table describes the five types that are found in the MOLLY OF DENALI series.

Informational Text	Purpose	Examples
Informative/Explanatory	to convey information about the natural or social world	information books about science and social studies topics (e.g., frogs, Egypt); reference books such as atlases and field guides; some websites and apps; some magazine articles; some pamphlets; some posters
Procedural or How-To	to teach someone how to do something	text on how to carry out a science investigation; text on how to make something, such as an entree or craft; text on how to navigate to a particular place; text on how to administer first aid
Biographical	to interpret and share the experiences of a real person	profiles of individuals (e.g., on the web, on television); books that are biographies
Nonfiction Narrative	to interpret and share the story of a real event	the true story of a specific historical event; the history of a nation's development
Functional	to support the carrying out of everyday tasks	schedules, weather charts, lists, forms, basic labels, signs

## What Isn't Informational Text?

The Common Core State Standards list the following under “literature” rather than “informational text.”

- Stories: Children’s adventure stories, folktales, legends, fables, fantasy, realistic fiction, myth, historical fiction, mysteries, science fiction, allegories, parodies, satire, and graphic novels
- Drama: Staged dialogue, brief familiar scenes, one-act and multi-act plays, (in written form and on film)
- Poetry: Nursery rhymes, narrative poems, limericks, free verse poems, lyrical poems, sonnets, odes, ballads, and epics

Source: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 31.

## The Need for Informational Text (IT)

For decades, U.S. educators believed that children first *learn to read* and then, around 4th grade, they begin to *read to learn*. This notion has long been reflected in PreK–3 classrooms, where beginning reading materials often consist mainly of literary texts (see above). Read-aloud texts were generally limited to stories and rarely included informational books. However, educators have begun to recognize the importance of using IT with young learners.

Informational texts are an integral part of daily life, school subjects, and active citizenship. In order to achieve success in these areas, students must be able to access, read, and create IT. For a variety of reasons—including having little exposure to IT in school or at home—many children receive limited exposure to or experience with IT in their early years, and struggle to catch up later on. Infusing IT in the early grades not only gives young children a jump-start on learning content knowledge but also engages them in reading and writing that establishes a firm foundation for their future literacy development.

The Common Core State Standards reflect the shift in thinking about IT. The standards expect children to be reading to learn as well as learning to read from the very beginning of school. Dozens of research studies suggest that young people can handle this shift. In fact, many children appear to be highly engaged when given the opportunity to read about the world around them and to demonstrate their expertise on topics through conversation, presentations, and written work. Increased use of IT also serves to deepen and improve students’ content knowledge and vocabulary—two major factors in preparing students to achieve their academic and life goals.

## Creating a Text-Rich Classroom Environment

Classroom libraries should aim for a 50–50 mix of literary and informational texts. IT that is appropriate for beginning readers—including patterned-predictable text and decodable texts—are increasingly available. Many of these books use photographs or illustrations to convey information. Your school or local children’s librarian can help you build your classroom collection with exciting and varied selections.

IT should also be used frequently as read-alouds, with the appropriate techniques similar to those you would use for any story time: for example, pausing to ask and answer questions about the text and explaining or modeling how to read and understand challenging words. You will also want to describe and model the use of various features common to IT, such as tables of contents, headings, glossaries, captions, and indexes.

Other ways to incorporate IT into classroom instruction include offering IT in children’s play areas and as independent reading options as well as providing opportunities for children to:

- listen to informational presentations,
- research informational topics through online and print sources, as well as first-hand experiences,
- write IT or develop informational presentations.

You can also expose children to IT within the classroom environment, such as through:

- informative and intriguing posters,
- informational articles and directions in high-traffic areas (for example, where children line up),
- bulletin boards filled with graphics, charts, maps, and other items,
- play areas with IT texts such as maps, recipes, pictures with captions,
- children’s own informational writing.

The internet, of course, offers vast amounts of IT, including some sites geared toward young children. From a young age, children can begin to learn the basics of navigating the web safely and effectively, recognizing high-quality and reliable websites, using electronic menus, and understanding search boxes and keywords.

## Informational Text and MOLLY OF DENALI

The MOLLY OF DENALI series was specifically created to model the various ways that children can use informational texts in their daily lives. Research suggests that children best learn from and about IT when using it in a real-world context. In the series, 10-year-old Molly Mabray helps her parents run the Denali Trading Post, a general store and transport hub in the fictional village of Qyah (pronounced KI-yah), north of Denali, Alaska.

An important aspect of the series is its culturally authentic portrayal of Alaska Native culture and values. Science and social studies topics, as well as social-emotional learning are also featured.

The series uses exciting, actual events in Molly's daily life to create authentic IT learning. Molly's adventures on the show, sometimes in conjunction with scientists, writers, tourists, and others who visit Qyah, offer opportunities to demonstrate how IT is used in order to:

- solve real-world problems
- satisfy one's curiosity
- take advantage of opportunities
- teach others
- accomplish tasks

Because Molly lives in a rural area of Alaska and gets to do things such as fly in a bush plane and dog-sled through the forest, she relies on a wider range of IT than most kids her age. The stories feature many types of informational texts: maps, museum placards, oral histories, plane schedules, instructions, survival guides, historical photographs, vlogs (video blogs), and more.

Molly's world is one of tremendous beauty, with diverse plant and animal life and interesting land features, including forests, mountains, volcanoes, and lakes. This environment also provides reasons to read, write, listen to, present, view, and visually represent informational texts about the nature world, such as field guides, internet sites, and explanations from local experts.

Through their experiences and adventures, Molly and her friends also demonstrate how children can use IT to convey information themselves. They can write their own books or contribute to writing by grownups, develop exhibits and presentations to teach others, write instructions for people to follow, and so on.

## **IT Learning Goals in MOLLY OF DENALI**

The MOLLY OF DENALI curriculum, created by a team led by series advisor and informational text expert Nell Duke, identifies 15 major IT Learning Goals. The Learning Goals reflect and incorporate some key standards from the Common Core State Standards and the PBS/CPB Ready To Learn Literacy Framework. They also reflect research on young children's development of IT reading and writing. For example, research shows that a combination of building content knowledge and, in that context, teaching comprehension strategies is powerful for fostering reading development.

Every MOLLY OF DENALI episode contains two 11-minute animated stories, plus a 2-minute “Ask Molly” live-action segment featuring children doing a related real-life activity. Each 11-minute story targets one or more Learning Goals, although others may also be addressed. All of the stories incorporate Learning Goal #1 (see list below).

Children can gain valuable exposure to and understanding of IT just by watching and enjoying the MOLLY OF DENALI series. Because the IT always serves a purpose within the plot, such as helping Molly and her friends solve a problem, children will have fun following Molly and her adventures as they learn. In addition, each of the MOLLY OF DENALI videos, lessons, and games on PBS LearningMedia identify which Learning Goals are highlighted in the accompanying media.

As you plan instruction, bear in mind that IT knowledge, skills, and dispositions should always be taught as a means to an end. For example, we don’t ask ourselves questions as we read for the sake of asking questions or demonstrating use of this strategy, we ask ourselves questions as we read in order to better understand what we are reading. Similarly, lessons should not be taught in isolation but in the context of a unit in which children are reading and/or writing informational text for an authentic purpose, such as to solve a problem in their community or to learn about a topic so that they can teach younger children within the school.



## Molly of Denali 15 Learning Goals

We want young children to learn or begin to learn:

1. To use informational texts they access (read, listen to, and/or view) and/or create (write, speak, and/or present, including visually) to meet their needs and wants, including to help them solve real-world problems, to satisfy their curiosity, to take advantage of opportunities, to teach others, and to accomplish tasks.
2. To determine the purpose and/or topic of informational texts (including what might be learned from or taught by them) in order to choose the most appropriate text for a given purpose.
3. To view texts as fallible, realizing that texts can sometimes be poorly written, ill suited to their purpose, or outright wrong—because they are out of date, because the source is not sufficiently knowledgeable, or even because the source is deliberately misleading.
4. To compare texts and integrate information across multiple textual sources when reading or researching (this could, but need not, lead to writing or developing a presentation).
5. To create an informative/explanatory or procedural text through writing and/or developing a presentation.
6. To pay attention to whether what they are reading is making sense and, if it isn't, to employ strategies, such as rereading, to fix the situation.
7. To compare and integrate what they already know (background or prior knowledge) with information provided in a text when reading, listening, and/or viewing.
8. To “read between the lines” of text when reading or listening, generating inferences that are important to constructing meaning with text but aren't explicitly stated in the text.
9. To ask themselves and others questions as they read or listen to a text or texts, using question words including how and why.
10. To generate mental pictures/images while reading or listening to text and/or to use detailed description in writing or presenting to help readers generate mental pictures.
11. To identify how a text is or can be organized to effectively convey information when reading, listening, writing, and/or presenting.
12. To use strategies to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words when reading, including saying the word aloud, examining written context and/or graphics around the word, perhaps looking at word parts, and perhaps drawing on cognates.
13. To use a variety of language, navigational, structural, and graphical text features to help access (read, listen to, and/or view) or convey (write, speak, and/or present, including visually) meaning (which vary depending upon the type of informational text). These include, but aren't necessarily limited to:
  - Language features:** definitions, explanations, description, denotative language, new terms/vocabulary (see also Goal #12)
  - Navigational features:** tables of contents, indexes, headings and subheadings, search boxes, electronic menus
  - Structural features:** introductions, conclusions, glossaries, titles, materials, specific text structures (see also Goal #10); in procedural or how-to text, titles, materials, numbered steps
  - Graphical features:** photographs and illustrations, captions, labels, diagrams, tables, charts, graphs, maps, bold print
14. To make informational texts they are writing or presenting better (e.g., by adding detail, by clarifying) to most effectively convey information to the audience.
15. To determine the main idea as well as key details in a text, in some cases resulting in a summary of what has been read or listened to.



## Additional Reading

For additional reading on informational text, you may want to consult one or more of the following resources:

Shanahan, T., Callison, K., Carriere, C., Duke, N. K., Pearson, P. D., Schatschneider, C., & Torgesen, J. (2010). *Improving reading comprehension in kindergarten through 3rd grade: A practice guide* (NCEE 2010-4038). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/practiceguide/14>

Duke, N. K. (2014). *Inside information: Developing powerful readers and writers of informational text through project-based instruction*. New York: Scholastic.

Santoro, L. E., Baker, S. K., Flen, H., Smith, J. L., & Chard, D. J. (2016). *Using read-alouds to help struggling readers access and comprehend complex, informational text*. (2016). <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0040059916650634?journalCode=tcxa>

Graham, S., Bollinger, A., Booth Olson, C., D'Aoust, C., MacArthur, C., McCutchen, D., & Olinghouse, N. (2012). *Teaching elementary school students to be effective writers: A practice guide* (NCEE 2012-4058). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/17>

White, A. (2015). *Using digital think-alouds to build comprehension of online informational texts*. <https://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/trtr.1438>

## Source Notes

This essay was adapted from the following sources:

Duke, N. K., Greenwald, C., Lund, A. E. (2019) "Informational text adventures with Molly of Denali" in *Getting Ready to Learn: Creating Effective Educational Children's Media*, edited by Shelley Pasnik. New York and London: Routledge.

Duke, N. K. (2013). *Starting out: Practices to use in K-3*. Educational Leadership.

Duke, N. K. (2018). *Molly of Denali curriculum guide*. WGBH Educational Foundation.



MOLLY OF DENALI™ is produced by WGBH Kids and Atomic Cartoons in association with CBC Kids.

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Funding for MOLLY OF DENALI™ is provided by a Ready To Learn Grant from the U.S. Department of Education; the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People; and by public television viewers. Additional funding made possible with the participation of the Province of British Columbia Production Services Tax Credit. Corporate funding provided by Homer and the T. Rowe Price College Savings Plan.

The contents of this program were developed under a grant from the Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. The project is funded by a Ready To Learn Grant (PR/AWARD No. U295A150003, CFDA No. 84.295A) provided by the Department of Education to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.