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By [Stephanie Chandler](#) | February 19, 2019

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5 Formats of Nonfiction Book Content Beyond Words by Carrie Anton



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One of the best writing tips I ever received came from the eight-year-old daughter of a colleague during my first year as a nonfiction book editor for American Girl. Our contemporary line of advice and activity books were geared toward young girls, so my coworker's offspring was comparable to having our own mini focus group. Upon peeking through the pages her mom planned to edit from home one evening, the daughter responded with one short phrase that would forever change the way I write and edit: "Words, words, words."

In defense of that book draft warranting such a ho-hum response, the manuscript at this stage was merely copy flowed onto the page with no formatting. A lack of design, color, and illustration can make it difficult to capture anyone's attention, let alone that of a girl raised in an interactive media generation. Still, her blah reaction encouraged me to look again with fresh eyes at the manuscript I was assigned to edit.

When writing for kids, it may seem natural to rely on design and illustration to do the heavy lifting. After all, pictures are children's gateways into books. But it's important to remember illustrations and design should merely complement the content, not upstage it. Pages of words were still sure to come in future books projects I led, but my goal was to seek out opportunities where straight narrative could be swapped for something more dynamic. Fifteen years, 40+ edited titles, and 10+ authored books later, and it's a content strategy I still wield no matter what age my reader may be.

More Than Words

Nonfiction narrative writing serves a purpose, but it's not your only option for conveying information to your reader. In fact, by employing the following content formats throughout your book, your audience may actually better understand and retain the messages you aim to deliver.



1. Quizzes: When writing [Me, Myself & Ideas: The Ultimate Guide to Brainstorming Solo](#), my latest co-authored nonfiction book geared toward entrepreneurs, freelancers, and independent thinkers, I needed to address the different ways people approach ideation. Sure, I could've created a subheading for each type and then wrote paragraphs of copy beneath, but that required the reader to sift through pages of content not relevant to him or her. By setting up this section instead as a personality quiz (and who doesn't love to do those in magazines and online?), I was able to navigate my reader directly to the applicable content without wasting his or her time.

2. Charts, graphs, and tables: Data written out in word form can be troublesome to digest. Instead, follow the mantra scriptwriters use when creating content for the big screen: Show, don't tell.

3. Flowcharts: A diagram of arrow-connected boxes offers a graphical approach to processes or workflows. And when the boxes are filled with question and answers, it creates an opportunity, similar to quizzes, where readers can drill down to create custom content experiences unique to their needs.

4. Q & A: Instead of quoting and paraphrasing what an expert, celebrity, or other person of interest has to say on a subject, capture the conversation in a question-and-answer format. Not only does this allow for the subject's true voice and personality to shine through, but it also tends to be a lot less work for you so long as you've transcribed the interview.

5. Timelines: Sharing a sequence of events in a narrative format can quickly feel akin to a textbook. Make the content more visual—and thus easier to remember—by creating a timeline marking important dates and snippets of high-detail information. You can always support the timeline with more in-depth material throughout the chapter, but having the visual may allow readers to better grasp your direction, and thus make them more interested to dig into the minutiae.

As a writer, I'm nothing without words. However, to truly engage my readers, I strongly believe my writing toolbox must contain more than just paragraphs, sentences, and headings. Years of experience proved the better equipped I was to deliver content in unique and interesting ways, the better my readers responded. So the next time you're creating content and it all begins to feel like "words, words, words," consider your options for making your message more appealing.

Author Bio:

Carrie Anton worked as a full-time author and editor for American Girl Publications' Advice & Activity line from 2005 through 2013, during which time she wrote multiple contemporary nonfiction books for 8-to-12-year-old girls. Anton left the cube life in 2013 to grow [Wonder: An Idea Studio](#) while girl-bossing as a freelance writer. Her writing has been published by Women's Health, Family Circle, Oxygen, Draft, and Outside, among others. Her latest book, which showcases all kinds of nonfiction content formats, is [Me, Myself & Ideas: The Ultimate Guide to Brainstorming Solo](#). Follow Carrie through her ideation business, Wonder: An Idea Studio: On Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/wonderideastudio/> On Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/wonderideastudio/> On LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/carrieanton/>



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