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Writing with Authority

FOR CHILDREN

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Each year, I visit between fifty and seventy-five schools across the continent, giving different programs to various age groups. My favorite presentation for grades four through six focuses on how to do research, and I demonstrate by taking students on a photographic journey in a deep-sea submersible to learn about bioluminescent marine organisms. Before plunging into the abyss, however, I ask the kids, “How do you do research?” Those who answer “books” earn a special place in my heart, but seven out of ten times, the first student I call on answers, “the Internet.”

I, of course, warn kids about the Internet’s pitfalls—how most websites are merely error-filled advertisements coaxing people to consume things or ideas. Alas, my warnings have done little to stem the Internet’s inexorable

tide. Even worse, I’ve found myself relying on the Web for one or two of my *own* book projects! And this begs the question: how *does* one write with authority these days?

My own choice of research options depends a lot on the kind of book I’m writing. A shorter book doesn’t necessarily demand simpler references. My whimsical picture books *Beaks!*, *Animal Dads*, *Teeth*, and *Wings* contain only about a thousand words, so I have to make doubly sure that each word delivers the juiciest bite. Animal reference books written by experts provide most of this flavor, but the tastiest morsels come directly from scientific papers in research journals.

Research journals, in fact, are the backbone of many of my books—and much of my authority as a writer. When writing *Reign of the Sea Dragons*,

I visited my local university library and ran dozens of database searches on topics related to ancient marine reptiles. I looked up general topics such as plesiosaurs and ichthyosaurs, but also individual species names—a process that produced scientific papers on the latest, most exciting discoveries about these fearsome giants of the past.

What if there aren’t any scientific papers or books on a subject? Invariably, I turn to experts. I had a particularly difficult time researching *Pocket Babies and Other Amazing Marsupials*, a *Booklist* Editor’s Choice selection. Sure, I found plenty of information on koalas, wombats, and other well-known marsupials, but when it came to the hundred or so American opossum species, I ran into an informational brick wall. I located only a handful of scientific papers and found only the scantest mention of these animals in reference texts.

With nowhere else to turn, I consulted the mammalogist I profiled in my 1997 book, *Monteverde*. He put me in touch with Dr. Ron Pine at the University of Kansas Museum of Natural History. Dr. Pine not only had first-hand experiences with many South and Central American marsupials, but he was passionate about his subjects. Without him, I doubt I could have created a credible section on these little-known critters.

Consulting with experts offers many other advantages besides information. Experts create that all-important person-to-person connection between author and reader. An expert's quotes help bring writing alive by adding humor, anecdotes, and opinion to nonfiction work. They deepen the voice and authority of the author, no matter what the subject.

But while most of us associate research with nonfiction, fiction also presents its share of investigative challenges. My newest thriller, *Double Eagle*, weaves the tale of two teenaged boys who discover a priceless, previously unknown twenty-dollar gold piece—or “double eagle”—in a Civil War fort in southern Alabama. To research the book, I read up on the Civil War, the fall of New Orleans, blockade runners, and the New Orleans Mint. It wasn't enough. One evening, I turned to my wife and asked, “Do you want to go to Alabama?”

The following November we began a glorious month at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, located right next to historic Fort Gaines. Every few days my four-year-old son and I hiked over to the fort to explore it from top to bottom. Conversations with the fort historian gave me important ideas for the book's most exciting scenes, but it was my personal observations—running

my hands over bricks made by slaves, sitting in dank bastions and storerooms, inhaling the salt air coming off the Gulf of Mexico—that helped me create the rich, authentic texture of the book, one that rings true for readers.

Personal observation and experience, in fact, are probably the most under-emphasized research tools in a writer's kit, and among the most important. Even in my most hard-core science books, my observations allow me to describe subjects, make connections, and prioritize information in ways that other references cannot.

No matter what kind of references a writer uses, however, ultimate authority springs from an ability to differentiate good from bad material. How can a writer—especially a young writer—do this? Here are some tips.

Look at the source.

An article from the *New York Times* website is going to be more reliable than an article from an advocacy group such as the Sierra Club or the National Rifle Association. Similarly, a book by a well-known academic historian is probably going to be more reliable than one by a generalist writer who writes about everything.

Confirm that the information is supported.

If most sources list the world's largest snake as thirty feet long, and one lists it as fifty feet long, think twice before listing the larger number. Also beware of *exact* facts listed over and over again in different sources. These facts are most likely repeated by lazy writers unwilling to roll up their sleeves and verify them.

Avoid blogs and blog-like media.

My rule: Never believe *anything* on a blog. Blogs are people's opinions or experiences. Period. The same thing applies to television and radio talk shows, including the many “fuzzy news” programs that dominate the airwaves.

As with anything else, experience hones the discrimination that raises the quality of one's work. With just a little mentoring, however, even the youngest writers can be trained to make better choices, whether they are surfing the Web or digging into the darkest recesses of a university library. Always remember, though, to remind your young researchers to have fun. With the dominance of the Internet, it's a brave new world out there, but as always, it's an exciting one. Discovery lies at its core.

Sneed B. Collard III is the author of more than fifty books for young people and the winner of the prestigious Washington Post–Children's Book Guild Award for Nonfiction. He has written three novels, *Dog Sense*, *Flash Point*, and *Double Eagle*. He may be contacted by e-mail at collard@bigsky.net or through his website www.sneedbcollardiii.com.

