

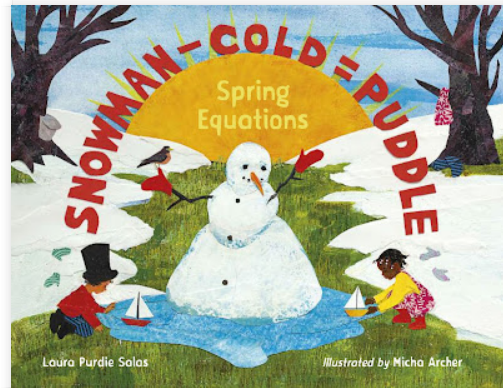
My Favorite Research Story by Laura Purdie Salas



Today we continue the series in which award-winning nonfiction authors discuss the joys and challenges of the research process with an essay by Laura Purdie Salas. Thank you, Laura.

I have a confession: I hate interviewing people. Although I've asked a NASA astronaut about his space boots and discussed chipmunk torpor with a hospital-ridden scientist, my favorite research techniques are experiential. And my simplest approaches are wondering, watching, and remembering.

Back in 2014, I was noodling around with equation poems, brief equations that reveal something about the world. I wrote a couple hundred using facts I already knew (*dinosaurs + meteor = good-byyyyyyyyyye!*) before I settled on my topic: spring. The world changes in spring—especially if you live up north. And equations are all about change.



Great! But I needed a bunch of new equations, and it wasn't spring. First, I mined some memories, looking through old digital images and browsing archived calendars at nature centers. The memories poured in.

Every winter in Minnesota, people haul ice houses onto frozen lakes for ice fishing. (As I grew up in Florida, I find this mind-boggling!) Every spring, the temperatures rise and the ice melts. And at least one ice house sits half sunken because the owner didn't get it off the lake in time. So...things melt. This reminded me of the sad good-byes to our daughters' melted snowmen. A snowman would be more familiar to kids, so...

snowman – cold = puddle



I also remembered a maple syrup activity at our local Elm Creek Park. We tapped maple trees, watched boiling sap, and ate maple syrup over ice cream. Yum! A delicious memory and another equation!

maple trees x buckets + boiling = sticky smile

When spring 2015 rolled around, I was ready to climb out of my memories and research in person. I observed the natural world intently that spring with all of my senses.

At Elm Creek Park, I bobbed to the beat of a downy woodpecker battering an oak tree.

bark + beak = drum

I also heard Canada geese migrating north overhead—one of my favorite spring sounds. But I already had a bird sound with the woodpecker. I kept a daily watch for geese, wondering *What do they look like, besides a vee?*

My nose got in on the act, too. My neighborhood walk passed several blocks full of enormous lilac bushes. When they bloomed—whew! The intense fragrance made me think of my mom’s favorite perfume, White Shoulders.



As spring flowed on, the calls of frogs filled the dusk air around Rice Lake. Some species made little chirps, while others honked and croaked. So many instruments!

frogs + night = symphony

In late spring, purely in the name of research, of course, I blew on dandelions.

1 dandelion x 1 breath = 100 parachutes

Then spring was over, and summer and fall, too, but I was still working on the book. How could I experience spring during winter? Every night, as I walked our beagle, Captain Jack Sparrow, down the icy road, I’d glance up to find Orion in the sky. I love the stories of the constellations and how the stars make me feel cared for, somehow. I realized that even though Orion isn’t visible in spring in the Northern Hemisphere, I could still capture that comforting feeling of looking to the dark sky to see the (different) constellations telling their tales.

sky – day = stories

Almost every equation poem in **Snowman-Cold=Puddle** can be traced back to something I saw, heard, tasted, touched, or smelled—close to home! Of course, I supplemented my observational research with tons of reading and email correspondence with experts. But experiencing these things myself gave me the emotional core of the book—even though it’s nonfiction! Experiencing spring physically highlighted the mysteries and beauty of our constantly changing world. It made me approach the topic with awe and excitement.

Sometimes, my in-person research is more exciting, as when I cuddled a bottle-fed lamb at a sheep farm or took a week’s voyage on a Great Lakes iron ore freighter. But often, my research happens close to home. There’s a lot of cool stuff all around us, no matter where you live. You just have to open your eyes (and your ears, mouth, nose, etc.) and pay attention.

Former teacher **Laura Purdie Salas** believes reading picture books and poems can have a huge impact on your life. Her 130 nonfiction and poetry books for kids, including **Lion of the Sky**, the **Can Be...** series, and **BookSpeak!**, have won some nice awards, like *Kirkus* Best Books, Bank Street Best Books, and NCTE Notables. Laura shares inspiration and practical tips with educators at laurasalas.com or on social media [@LauraPSalas](https://twitter.com/LauraPSalas)

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