



COMMON CORE READING & WRITING WORKSHOP

# A CURRICULAR PLAN FOR The Reading Workshop



LUCY CALKINS AND COLLEAGUES FROM  
THE READING AND WRITING PROJECT





A CURRICULAR PLAN FOR  
**The Reading Workshop**  
**Grade 5**

Common Core Reading and Writing Workshop

Lucy Calkins  
*and Colleagues from*  
*The Reading and Writing Project*



HEINEMANN • PORTSMOUTH, NH



An imprint of Heinemann  
361 Hanover Street  
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912  
[www.heinemann.com](http://www.heinemann.com)

*Offices and agents throughout the world*

© 2011 by Lucy Calkins

All rights reserved. This material may be printed solely for individual, noncommercial use.  
Copyright notice and other proprietary notice must be included with any material printed.  
Reproduction of any material within this site for any commercial purpose is prohibited  
without written permission from the Publisher.

"Dedicated to Teachers" is a trademark of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

ISBN-13: 978-0-325-04310-4

ISBN-10: 0-325-04310-8

EDITORS:

*Kate Montgomery and Teva Blair*

PRODUCTION:

*Sonja Chapman*

TYPESETTER:

*Cape Cod Compositors, Inc.*

COVER AND INTERIOR DESIGNS:

*Jenny Jensen Greenleaf*

COVER PHOTOGRAPHY:

*Peter Cunningham, [www.petercunninghamphotography.com](http://www.petercunninghamphotography.com)*



# Contents

OVERVIEW OF THE YEAR FOR FIFTH-GRADE READERS . . . . .	1
UNIT 1: Agency and Independence: <i>Launching Reading with Experienced Readers</i> . . .	18
UNIT 2: Following Characters into Meaning: <i>Synthesize, Infer, and Interpret</i> . . . . .	32
UNIT 3: Nonfiction Reading: <i>Using Text Structures to Comprehend Expository, Narrative, and Hybrid Nonfiction</i> . . . . .	54
UNIT 4: Nonfiction Research Projects: <i>Teaching Students to Navigate Complex Nonfiction Text Sets with Critical Analytical Lenses</i> . . . . .	70
UNIT 5: Historical Fiction Book Clubs or Fantasy Book Clubs . . . . .	81
UNIT 6: Interpretation Text Sets . . . . .	110
UNIT 7: Test Preparation . . . . .	129
UNIT 8: Informational Reading: <i>Reading, Research, and Writing in the Content Areas</i> . . . . .	155
UNIT 9: Option 1—Historical Fiction or Fantasy Fiction . . . . .	173
UNIT 9: Option 2—Author Study: <i>Reading Like a Fan</i> . . . . .	174



# Overview of the Year for Fifth-Grade Readers

SEPTEMBER	UNIT 1: Agency and Independence: <i>Launching Reading with Experienced Readers</i>
OCTOBER	UNIT 2: Following Characters into Meaning: <i>Synthesize, Infer, and Interpret</i>
NOVEMBER	UNIT 2: Nonfiction Reading: <i>Using Text Structures to Comprehend Expository, Narrative, and Hybrid Nonfiction</i>
DECEMBER	UNIT 4: Nonfiction Research Projects: <i>Teaching Students to Navigate Complex Nonfiction Text Sets with Critical Analytical Lenses</i>
JANUARY/FEBRUARY	UNIT 5: Historical Fiction Book Clubs or Fantasy Book Clubs
FEBRUARY/MARCH	UNIT 6: Interpretation Text Sets
MARCH/APRIL	UNIT 7: Test Preparation
MAY	UNIT 8: Informational Writing: <i>Reading, Research, and Writing in the Content Areas</i>
JUNE	UNIT 9: Option 1—Historical Fiction or Fantasy Fiction
JUNE	UNIT 9: Option 2—Author Study: <i>Reading Like a Fan</i>

Each year, the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project gathers together the members of our community—the teachers, coaches, schools leaders, and staff developers—to reconceptualize the curricular calendars so that they reflect the latest research and innovations in the teaching of reading. This year, you'll notice most dramatically the effect of the Common Core State Standards in the emphasis, across the year and within each unit, on analytical thinking and reading skills. This community has merged its expertise to create curriculum, and to link that curriculum to tried and true teaching pedagogy so that children may rise to the highest levels demanded by the Common Core State Standards. This is demanding work, and as you study the curriculum, you may find that colleagues will want to form some study groups, to ensure that teacher leaders in your school are developing the expertise needed to truly teach children to be powerful readers of complex texts.

Of course, the suggested order of units and the teaching points offered with each unit are only one way that this work could go. You'll want and need to collect and study your data on your readers, and then sit together with colleagues to plan your on-site adaptation of the curriculum. It felt important to offer teaching points for as many units as possible this year, because the level of teaching demanded is so high. In response to teacher requests, we have provided, wherever possible, a menu of teaching points, so that there is more time to assess children and use this knowledge to differentiate. As always, we encourage you to have these conversations collaboratively—both across grade levels and across the school. To teach in such a way that children become extraordinarily skilled, it's crucial that teachers in a grade level can depend on children moving up from the prior grade with the highest possible level of shared practices. If teachers on a grade do devise a new unit of study that you are willing to share with other teachers, please send it to Lucy Calkins at [contact@readingandwritingproject.com](mailto:contact@readingandwritingproject.com).

The curricular calendar will be supported by a calendar of full-day conferences available to participating Project schools who sign up in advance. Some of these days will support reading and writing work linked closely to these units, and some days will be on special topics that will help teachers support their students across the year. Still other days will support our new content calendar. The conference days, and the units of study, put a special emphasis this year on assessment-driven instruction and on Common Core State Standards, and the TCRWP will continue to provide the latest research and expertise on these subjects. Another resource for teachers, which these units depend on, is the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading, A Curriculum for the Reading Workshop, Grades 3–5*.

You'll find, below, brief descriptions of the units of study for fifth-grade reading. In each unit, we want to teach new skills, while simultaneously building up children's repertoire of prior skills. We also want to maintain readers' stamina and volume. So always, in every unit, we're recommending that children read for at least forty minutes in school and at home, to read with engagement, fluency, accuracy, and meaning.



## A Quick Guide to the Reading Units 2011–2012

---

This year we changed the launch unit for fifth-grade graders so that it steps up their reading work to higher levels of agency and independence. The focus of the unit is on teaching students to take charge of their reading life. This includes using statistics to monitor their reading volume, studying the authors and genres that they are becoming passionate about, and accessing their repertoire of reading skills to read complex texts with high levels of engagement and comprehension. In the same way, the character unit ratchets up from fourth-grade character work, moving readers to infer about characters' motivations, changes, and the lessons they learn, and to interpret across texts by analyzing characters. In both Units One and Two, there is an increased emphasis on writing about reading—but we want to make sure that this emphasis doesn't interfere with reading volume, so you'll want to keep an eye on this balance.

The Common Core State Standards research reinforced something that our research at Teachers College was already telling us—that children need more practice with nonfiction reading. They also need more expert, explicit instruction in nonfiction reading skills. Therefore, both November and December are nonfiction units, with November focusing on using text structures to comprehend expository, narrative, and hybrid texts, and December focusing on nonfiction research projects. For both units of study, you'll want to look at your libraries and do what you can to buy, borrow, and share books so that kids have enough to read. They'll keep reading their chapter books during these units as well. Unit Four, on nonfiction research, is closely tied to the concurrent unit in writing research-based argument essays.

The fantasy unit has remained mostly the same as last year, because it was a great success. It helps students get to the higher levels of synthesis demanded by the Common Core State Standards, while the fantasy series helps students read with tremendously high volume. Teachers may decide, however, whether they want to choose to pursue fantasy or historical fiction at this time. They will probably want to pair their writing unit with this decision.

Interpretation text sets is a unit that builds on our thematic text sets from this year but clarifies the teaching so that more students can accomplish this high-level, analytical work, with greater success. The unit leads beautifully into the test-prep unit, which most schools in this high-stakes testing environment feel compelled to turn toward in March.

In May, we've included, once again, a content unit that collaborates with social studies. We do this because the content calendar offers units that can be taught within social studies time. This unit is a reading, writing, and research unit, and we imagine teachers might devote class time to it across all three disciplines.

Finally, we end the year with a unit of study on "reading like a fan," which is essentially an author study that becomes a "getting ready for summer reading" opportunity. Our fifth graders are increasingly experts on the authors they adore, and as they go off to middle school, we want to encourage them to take up what we hope will be life-long reading passions.

There is one addition that you'll see runs across units. That is, on the top of each unit, you'll find a reminder about the recommended benchmark reading level for that time of year. We hope this benchmark will help teachers keep in mind what the grade level standard is for that month, so that they'll be alert to which children we're most concerned about helping reach, or get closer to, that level.

## Assessment

---

We all know the joy of finding a book that is “just right” for us. When we are well matched to a book, reading can be one of life's greatest joys. On the other hand, when a book is “all wrong” instead of “just right,” reading can feel interminable, humiliating, and tedious. There will never be a single litmus test that can accurately match a child to books, but as teachers we can make some progress toward this goal if we provide each child with four things: 1) the opportunity to choose books that he or she wants to read, 2) a community of other readers (including especially the teacher) who promote, summarize, and talk about books with enthusiasm, 3) books that are easy enough for the reader that he or she will be given lots of opportunities for high-success reading, and 4) encouragement to occasionally read a text that is just a little challenging with the scaffolding to make the experience fruitful.

Assessing reading is enormously complex. Reading is every bit as rich, multi-layered, and invisible as thinking itself. Anyone who aspires to separate one strand of reading from all the rest, and then to label and measure that one strand or aspect of reading, must approach this effort with proper humility. No number, no label, no indicator is adequate for the task. Still, as responsible people, teachers need to assess children's reading in ways that give us as full a view as possible. New York City teachers have all been asked to track each child's progress in reading and to send the results of those assessments home at regular intervals throughout the year.

Some NYC schools may opt to use an assessment tool patterned after the state test. This assessment instrument contains passages of widely varying difficulty levels, followed by multiple-choice questions that aim to ascertain whether the child can infer, synthesize, predict, and so on. The TCRWP's position is that this assessment alone is not sufficient unless a teacher knows the text difficulty of the passage in question. A wrong answer in a multiple-choice question may not in fact say anything about a child's ability to infer, for example, or to determine importance. A teacher will not know whether the error reflects a problem with inference or whether it suggests that the child couldn't read the passage in the first place.

Therefore, the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, in concert with many NYC schools, developed an alternate way to track readers' progress. This system has been accepted by NYC's Department of Education as an option for all schools. This tool is available on the TCRWP website: [www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com). This tool contains two passages at each text level, A/Z, ranging in length from 20 to 400-plus words, followed by literal and inferential comprehension questions for each passage. Level A/K readers read books from one or two small sets of leveled texts. The TCRWP



uses collections of books that are described on the website. Children read the text at one level aloud to teachers, who record reading behaviors and miscues. Teachers record miscues for the first 100 words; if the child reads with 96–100% accuracy, then the child reads the remainder of the passage silently and answers questions (hopefully answering at least three of the four questions correctly). Through this assessment, a teacher can ascertain the general level of text difficulty that a child is able to read with ease and comprehension.

The truth is that using a short passage and a handful of questions to ascertain whether a child can read, say, a level T or V text is not perfect. We’ve also been using some book-length assessment tools, and these are described in the Assessment Inter-ludes within *Units of Study*. But the system of tracking readers’ progress along a gradient of text difficulty does provide an infrastructure to your reading workshop and allows a teacher to have some handle on kids’ progress.

Following is a table of benchmark reading levels. These levels are recommended *independent* reading levels. They are derived from a study of data from AssessmentPro, as well as the state and city benchmarks. The chart is updated and available always at [www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com).

	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	Apr	May	June
3rd	1 K 2 L 3 M 4 N	1 K 2 L 3 M 4 N	1 K 2 L/M 3 N 4 O	1 L 2 M 3 N 4 O	1 L 2 M 3 N 4 O	1 M 2 N 3 O 4 P	1 M 2 N 3 O 4 P	1 N 2 O 3 P 4 Q	1 N 2 O 3 P 4 Q	1 N 2 O 3 P 4 Q
4th	1 M 2 N/O 3 P/Q 4 R	1 N 2 O 3 P/Q 4 R	1 N 2 O/P 3 Q/R 4 S	1 N 2 O/P 3 Q/R 4 S	1 N 2 P 3 R 4 S	1 O 2 P 3 R 4 T	1 O 2 P/Q 3 R/S 4 T	1 O 2 Q 3 S 4 T	1 P 2 Q/R 3 S 4 U	1 P 2 Q/R 3 S/T 4 U
5th	1* P 2 Q/R 3 S/T 4 U	1 P 2 Q/R 3 S/T 4 U	1 P 2 Q/R 3 S/T 4 U	1 P 2 Q/R 3 S/T 4 U	1 Q 2 R/S 3 T/U 4 V	1 Q 2 R/S 3 T/U 4 V	1 Q 2 R/S/T 3 U 4 V	1 Q/R 2 S/T 3 U 4 V	1 R 2 S/T 3 U/V 4 W	1 R 2 S/T 3 U/V 4 W
6th	1 R 2 S/T 3 U/V 4 W	1 R 2 S/T/U 3 V 4 W	1 S 2 T/U 3 V/W 4 X	1 S 2 T/U 3 V/W 4 X	1 S/T 2 U/V 3 W 4 X	1 T 2 U/V 3 W 4 X	1 T 2 U/V 3 W 4 X	1 U 2 V 3 W/X 4 Y	1 U 2 V 3 W/X 4 Y	1 U 2 V 3 W/X 4 Y
7th	1 U 2 V 3 W/X 4 Y	1 U 2 V 3 W/X 4 Y	1 U 2 V/W 3 X 4 Y	1 U 2 V/W 3 X 4 Y	1 U 2 V/W 3 X 4 Y	1 U 2 V/W 3 X 4 Y	1 U 2 V/W 3 X 4 Y	1 U/V 2 W/X 3 Y 4 Z	1 V 2 W/X 3 Y 4 Z	1 V 2 W/X 3 Y 4 Z
8th	1 V 2 W/X 3 Y 4 Z	1 V 2 W/X 3 Y 4 Z	1 W 2 X 3 Y 4 Adult Lit	1 W 2 X 3 Y/Z 4 Ad Lit	1 W 2 X 3 Y/Z 4 Ad Lit	1 W 2 X/Y 3 Y/Z 4 Ad Lit	1 W 2 X 3 Y/Z 4 Ad Lit	1 W 2 X/Y 3 Z 4 Ad Lit	1 W 2 X/Y 3 Z/Ad Lit 4 Ad Lit	1 W 2 X/Y 3 Z/Ad Lit 4 Ad Lit

\* The numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 in this table represent the NY ELA test scores that would predictably follow from a student reading at the text level named, at the grade level named. There is no text level that predicts a 4, because a score of 4 generally only allows for one or two errors—and is therefore unpredictable.

A word of caution: our data also suggests that running records on a 200-word passage gives a teacher only a little window onto what a child can do as a reader, and we strongly suspect that reading a lower-level passage with great depth and thoughtfulness and attentiveness to details, using high-level comprehension skills, is extremely important. It could be that children should *be able to* read the levels listed above with accuracy and a basic level of comprehension, but that in fact they'd be well-advised to spend most of their time reading easier texts with deep levels of comprehension—that is a judgment call that schools and teachers need to make.

You'll also want to track each child's reading rate and note the way this changes across time. Here's a table that shows *targeted* oral reading rates (words per minute), by grade level:

General Range of Adequate Reading Rates by Grade Level			
Grade	WPM	Grade	WPM
1	60–90	6	195–220
2	85–120	7	215–245
3	115–140	8	235–270
4	140–170	9	250–270
5	170–195	12	250–300

*Harris and Sipay (1990)*

## Reading Level Bands of Difficulty

---

The TCRWP thought collaborative is convinced that as readers learn how to process a variety of increasingly challenging texts, the work that readers need to do will change somewhat. We do not think that it is advantageous for you to attempt to keep in mind a score of tiny characteristics for each and every level of book difficulty, nor do we think that it holds true to try to specify the characteristics of any one level of text difficulty. On the other hand, we have found there are some general characteristics of texts that one will tend to find at different bands of text difficulty and that understanding these complexities will help you to work toward Common Core State Standards. If you grasp the general characteristics of any one band of text levels, this provides you with a sense of how to differentiate your instruction for readers according to the band of text difficulty in which they are reading.

Some of your students will come to you reading in the N/Q band of text difficulty. Before they read these texts, the reader will have needed to follow a single story line of a main character who encounters one main problem and comes to one main solution—now for these readers there is apt to be more than one cause of a problem, and the problem itself may be multidimensional. If a teacher asked the reader of texts in this band of difficulty, “What’s the central problem in this story?” the reader would be wise to stall a bit over the question and to suggest that there is more than one

problem or that the problem has different parts of different layers. In this band of levels, not only the plot but also the main character will be more complex than they used to be, but the character will come right out and tell readers how he or she feels. It will not be subtle. Readers at this level will probably need help dealing with figurative language.

Many of your students reading in the R/S/T band of text difficulty will find that holding onto the central plotline becomes increasingly difficult because seemingly minor characters may end up as important to the plotline. This means that readers need to hold minor characters and subordinate plots in mind. Children's predictions, for example, might include the expectation that a character who made a somewhat fleeting appearance or a plotline that seemed unrelated to the main story line could return, playing a more important role than might have been expected. At this level of text difficulty, readers need to follow not only the evolving plotline but also the evolving setting. The setting becomes a force in the story, influencing characters and the plot just as, say, an antagonist might. In historical fiction, for example, readers need to construct a timeline of historical events as well as a timeline of the protagonist's main events, and more than that, to see the two timelines intersect. An event happens in the world, and that event becomes part of the chain of cause and effect that motors the story's plot. In books within this band of difficulty, characters continue to be complex, and now their character traits are often not explicitly stated. Readers need to infer these from their actions. Often in books at this level, readers may realize something about a character that the character does not know about himself or herself. Also at this level, a character's changes are often left for the reader to infer (whereas in the earlier band, the character's inner thinking essentially told the reader those changes).

Some of your readers will be reading in the U/V levels of text difficulty. These texts often contain chunks—even chapters—that are confusing, and readers need to realize that they are supposed to be confused and to be able to read on, trying to puzzle through their confusion. At this level, the setting and the plot, too, often further more abstract meanings. The changes in the weather, for example, are apt to be externalized indicators of changes that are internal as well. Characters are much more complex—they may say one thing and mean another, or be one way in one relationship and another way in another relationship. Readers are expected to read in a much more interpretive fashion.

## Consider the Results of a Spelling Inventory—Synthesizing Data across Assessment Measures

---

Another window into students' reading is the spelling inventory designed by Donald Bear et al. This spelling inventory is not about getting the word right. It indicates the *spelling features* that students control, such as beginning and ending consonants, long and short vowels, the variety of suffixes, and so on. The spelling inventory reveals a

child's developmental level on graphophonics and also suggests the level of text at which a student will be successful. You can use this as a source of information to draw upon when determining students' reading levels. More importantly, this information will suggest the word study work that will most benefit this reader. It is the act of reading across this information that is most important. You may refer to the assessment section of the TCRWP website ([www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com)) to access more information about spelling inventories.

## Maintaining Reading Logs

---

We recommend that schools establish and implement policies so that each child in the school (grades 2 to 8) maintains a daily record of the books he or she reads in school and at home. This log must contain the title, author, the level of difficulty (for example, level P), the numbers of minutes the child spent reading, and the starting and ending page numbers. Some people question whether it is necessary to include the level of difficulty (when it is available). Our response is that this provides the teacher with vitally important information—information that exponentially increases the usefulness of the tool. For example, if a child devotes a week to reading *The Stolen Pony*, and we know that book is level M (the level of the *Magic Treehouse* books), then we know that the child has done an alarmingly small amount of reading during that week. On the other hand, if the book is level Z, then we would draw a different conclusion.

These logs are not places for responses to reading, nor do children write book summaries in them. They are simply records of time spent reading and volume of reading accomplished. You may ask, "How can a teacher be sure that the log accurately reflects the reading that the child has done?" We've found that if both logs and books are out on the table every day, this transparency brings a huge amount of accountability to logs.

We suggest that every day during reading time, every child should always have his or her log out on the table. The first thing the child does at the start of reading is to enter the starting time and page number; the last thing the child does before moving from reading to talking is to enter the ending time and page number. We also encourage teachers to refer to logs often in reading conferences: "I see you have been reading this book especially slowly. You galloped through that last book—why is this one progressing so differently for you?" "You seem to be skipping between books a lot lately—why do you think it has been hard for you to stay engrossed in one book?" "I notice this book is easier than the ones you have been reading—do you find your reading process is different now, when you are reading a lighter text?"

After a few weeks, we suggest you encourage children to study their own reading logs to articulate their reading habits. Children can work analytically with their partners to notice and think about changes in the average number of pages they've read. Children can also notice the genre choices they have made across time and the

relationship between genres or levels and volume. They can discuss patterns by studying the time they spend reading at home versus at school. The logs provide an irreplaceable window into students' reading lives. It is helpful to gather logs across one grade after a month, or across several grades, to compare how much students are reading and how they are moving through books.

School leaders, as well as teachers, must collect, save, and study these critical records. For example:

- A general rule of thumb is that a child should read approximately three-quarters of a page a minute. (This rule of thumb works across texts of varying levels because generally, as the pages become denser, the reader's abilities also become stronger.) A teacher and/or a principal will want to take notice if a child is reading a book at a dramatically slower rate than this. For example, alarms should go off if a child reads eight pages in thirty minutes. Why is the child not reading closer to twenty-four pages in that length of time? There may, of course, be good reasons.
- If a child reads an amount—say, thirty-four pages—during a half-hour in school, then brings that same book home and claims to read a much smaller amount—say, eight pages—within half an hour of reading time at home, alarms should go off. Is the child actually making enough time for reading at home?
- If you suggest the child reads books that are level T, and she instead reads many books that are far easier, this discrepancy must be researched and addressed. Perhaps the easier books are nonfiction texts and the child has wisely found that when reading nonfiction, she needs to search for books she can read with meaning. Perhaps the child recently completed a very taxing book and wants some easier reads. Then too, perhaps the child simply can't find other books that are more challenging and needs your help.
- It is crucial to let parents know if the volume of reading their child is doing is high, fairly high, quite low, or very low. The wonderful thing about this information is that parents can do something about it, and progress on this one front will have enormous payoff for every aspect of a child's reading development.

Above all, student logs are a way to be sure that everyone—teachers, principals, and students—keeps their eyes on the volume of reading that children are doing. Dick Allington's research suggests that it takes four hours for a student who reads 200 wpm to complete *Hatchet*. The chart that follows shows how long it should take students to complete different leveled books. Assuming that your students read for thirty minutes in class and thirty minutes at home, at a rate of 200 wpm, then you should expect a

student to finish reading *Hatchet* in eight days, which seems reasonable. You may find that a particular child takes twice as long to read *Hatchet*. This should prompt some research. Why is this child reading especially slowly? (If the child is reading below 120 accurate wpm, then alarm bells should go off. This child should be reading easier texts. Or perhaps the child is sitting in front of a text, rather than reading it.)

Long Should It Take a Child to Read a Book According to His or Her Reading Level?				
Title	Level	Approx # of Words	Reading Rate	# of Minutes per Book
<i>Henry and Mudge</i> (Rylant)	J	800–1000	100 wpm	10 minutes
<i>Horrible Harry</i> (Kline)	L	4,500	100 wpm 200 wpm	45 minutes 25 minutes
Magic Tree House Series (Osborne)	M	6,000	100 wpm 200 wpm	60 minutes 30 minutes
Henry Series (Cleary)	O	25,000	100 wpm 200 wpm	4 hours 2 hours
<i>Howliday Inn</i> (Howe)	P	30,000	100 wpm 200 wpm	5 hours 2½ hours
<i>Stone Fox</i> (Gardiner)**	P	12,000	100 wpm 200 wpm	2 hours 1 hour
<i>Hatchet</i> (Paulsen)**	R	50,000	100 wpm 200 wpm	8 hours 4 hours
<i>Missing May</i> (Rylant)**	W	24,500	100 wpm 200 wpm	4 hours 2 hours

\*\* Allington (2000)

## Getting Time to Assess at the Start of the Year

Years ago, the Project suggested that a teacher start the year by putting crates of mixed-level texts at the center of each table in the classroom, then asking kids to graze through those crates, reading whatever appealed to them while the teacher circled quickly about the room, assessing. Once a child was assessed, the teacher would give that reader a magazine box for his or her books. This child would no longer read from the mixed-level bin but would instead choose a few just-right, leveled books, storing the short stack of these books in his or her private bin. Visitors to the room in mid-September could see at a glance the percentage of kids who had been launched into just-right reading because these children had magazine boxes containing their books. The aim was to get everyone to this point within two weeks from the start of school.

By this time, however, the entire school has been working for a year or two to match readers to books. Therefore, it should no longer be necessary for you to begin the year with children in the holding pattern of reading through a random collection



of books from a crate at the center of the table. Instead, your class roster will convey the level of just-right book that each child was reading at the end of the previous school year. Ideally, children will also keep logs of the books they read during the summer so you can estimate whether a child's reading progressed or took a dive during those crucial months. If a child did not read over the summer, she will lose several levels during the summer, and so if you ascertain from the summer log that this child read only a few books, then you will move her back two levels from where she ended the previous school year. If a child did a lot of just-right reading during the summer, that child can resume reading at the level he or she was reading in June. In this way, you can rely on reading records to start the year off with each child reading from a short stack of appropriate books.

Of course, the fact that you start children reading books you've been told will be just right for them does not mean you won't reassess their reading; you will. But you can weave this assessment into your reading workshop once it is going full-swing. You could either do running records a week or two after school starts and then again right before your first report card or, if your school agrees, you could rely on informal assessments for now, watching kids with leveled books rather than doing running records, relying on June assessment levels and these informal observations. You may find that after two or three weeks with tons of reading, summer rustiness wears off and kids are already ready for another level of text difficulty. You could, then, wait to do your more formal assessments prior to fall report cards. This, of course, is a decision your school will need to make.

No matter what, it will be a huge priority to assess any reader who seems to not actually be reading. Watch for signs of disengagement: the head that revolves, the child who is always losing his or her place in a book, the youngster who uses reading time as a chance to get a drink of water or go to the bathroom.

When you do begin to do running records, we suggest you call three children over to you at a time, each carrying a book. Get one child started on the TCRWP formative assessment. While you listen to his or her reading, the other two can read independently. The assessed child needn't finish the passage before you ascertain whether it is too hard; and if it is, move to another passage right away. Once one child has read aloud 100 words and you have recorded the child's miscues, he or she can read the rest of the passage silently while you get the second child—who will already be right beside you—started reading aloud to you.

## The Components of Balanced Literacy

---

The term *balanced literacy* comes, in part, from the recognition that readers need a variety of different opportunities to learn. The reading workshop provides children with time to read, with a mentor who is a passionately engaged reader and wears his or her love of reading on the sleeve, with opportunities to talk and sometimes write about reading, and with explicit instruction in the skills and strategies of proficient

reading. All of this is incredibly important, but alone, it is not sufficient. Children also need the opportunities to learn from other components of balanced literacy.

They need, above all, to write. We assume that the reading workshop, as described in these pages, is balanced by a daily writing workshop, and we assume Teachers College Reading and Writing Project teachers will refer to the writing curricular calendar for help with writing. Children also need to study the conventions of written language, including writing with paragraphing, punctuation, and syntactical complexity. Either as part of this or separately, children need time to learn about spelling patterns and to study words—both their meanings and their spellings. Then, too, children also need daily opportunities to hear wonderful literature read aloud and frequent opportunities to participate in book talks around the read-aloud text. We expect teachers to read aloud and to lead interactive read-aloud sessions several times a week. Children need opportunities to read texts within content-area disciplines and to receive instruction in reading those texts well. Finally, children who struggle with fluency (that is, children who read slowly and robotically) need opportunities to participate in shared reading and in repeated oral readings.

## Reading Aloud

---

Reading aloud is crucial even in instances where the teacher does nothing more than read spectacular literature aloud in such a way that children listen with rapt attention, clamoring for more. The payoff for reading aloud becomes even greater when teachers read from a wide range of genres, which generally happens when teachers comb reading aloud into all parts of the days, including science, social studies, math, and so on.

The best way to tap into the potential power of reading aloud, however, is to use the read-aloud and book talk time to explicitly teach the skills of higher-level comprehension. To do this, a teacher first reads the upcoming section of the read-aloud book to himself or herself, noticing the mind-work that he or she does while reading. Then the teacher decides whether to use the upcoming read-aloud to help children draw upon their full repertoire of reading strategies or whether to angle the read-aloud in such a way as to support the development of a particular comprehension skill. Based on this decision, the teacher decides to demonstrate and then scaffold children in using either one or many skills and strategies.

If you decide, for example, to highlight envisionment, then insert Post-its in a couple places during the first pages of the read-aloud, as a reminder to pause as you read, to lower the book, and to muse a bit. Perhaps you can say, “I’m just picturing this. I can see Artie in the lead, walking down the path in the woods. It’s a narrow path, so Cleo is a few steps behind—there’s just room for one of them. The sun is filtering through the canopy of leaves overhead.” Of course, the teacher’s envisionment could spin on and on and on—it is important to stay brief! After demonstrating in such a manner for thirty seconds, tuck in a comment that names what has been done, like “Readers, I don’t really know that the path is narrow—the book hasn’t said that. But I

draw on all the forest trails I've ever seen, adding details from my own experiences. When I read on, though, sometimes I need to revise my picture. Let's see." Once the teacher has demonstrated the skill (in this case, envisioning) a few times, across perhaps three or four pages of the read-aloud, the teacher is apt to pause in the midst of reading and scaffold the children in envisioning. "I can just see the river, can't you? I'm picturing it—the colors. I'm hearing stuff too, aren't you? Use all the rivers you've ever stood beside to help you imagine the river." Sometimes these pauses are followed with, "Tell the person beside you what you are seeing, hearing," and sometimes they lead to the prompt, "Stop and jot what you see, what you hear." Either injunction can, a moment or two later, be followed with specific tips: "Make sure you are talking/writing in details. Are you using specific words to make your mental movie real?"

Of course, you could alter the sequence described above to show children how to develop theories about characters, think across texts, predict, or a host of other reading skills.

If you choose carefully, the read-aloud text can support the independent reading work your students are doing. For example, if the class is engaged in the unit of study on character (and students are thinking about characters as they read independently), you'd be wise to read aloud a chapter book with strong characters who change over the course of the text. If, on the other hand, the class is working on nonfiction, and some of the children's independent reading involves nonfiction texts, you will want to read aloud nonfiction texts that allow you to show children how nonfiction readers talk and think about (and between) texts.

Whatever skill you aim to teach, it's essential that you read in ways that not only demonstrate skills but that above all bring stories to life. Read with expression, fluency, intonation, and good pacing so that children feel like they are a part of the story and understand that this is what good reading sounds and feels like.

## Supporting Children's Vocabulary

---

Teachers are wise to recognize that we need to model not only a love of books and of writing but also a fascination with words themselves. If you wear your love of language on your sleeve, exuding interest in words and taking great pleasure in them, you'll help your children be more attentive to vocabulary.

Research is clear: the single most important thing you can do to enhance your children's knowledge of words is to lure your children into lots and lots and lots of reading. If children read a diverse range of books, they'll encounter a wider range of words. The vocabulary in historical fiction, science fiction, fantasy, and nonfiction will often be richer than vocabulary in realistic fiction and mysteries.

Teach children that when they come to unfamiliar words in a text, it really helps to pronounce the word as best the reader can, trying it out one way and then another to see if any pronunciation sounds familiar. Then ideally, the reader reads on past that word for just a bit before pausing to reread the section, thinking, "What might this

word mean?" The good reader substitutes a reasonable synonym—thus, the "ominous" clouds become the "rainy" clouds—and reads on. Some teachers tape an index card to each child's desk so that children can collect a few such words throughout the day, with page numbers for references. The children and teacher should aim to use these same words in conversations with each other and the class.

There will also be times for a teacher to lead the whole class into word inquiries, and that work will certainly involve the class exploring prefixes and suffixes and using these to alter the meaning of a base word. The key word is *explore*. Word study will be vastly more helpful if it is engaging to youngsters.

## Finding Great Literature to Refresh or Fill Up Libraries

---

One of the key factors in helping to make any reading unit of study exciting, rigorous, and independent is the interface between the unit and books. This year we interviewed wonderful educators across the country to develop book lists of recommended books. We understand the responsibility involved in this work and did not put a single book on the list unless that book was recommended by more than one person and unless these were people whose judgments we trust. The lists are carefully organized—for historical fiction, for example, there will be a time (say, Colonial America) and leveled books we recommend around that time. Similarly, the social issue list is organized around social issues and leveled books we recommend for each social issue. All the books on the lists are leveled, either with Fountas and Pinnell's levels, if those exist, or with Scholastic Book Wizard levels. If neither source existed, we noted the lexile level that you can use to create levels by converting this lexile level to an approximation of Fountas and Pinnel levels (take those with a special grain of salt). The books are all available through Booksource, and we're assured that their price is the lowest available price for books of comparable production quality.

The following lists have been created to support the different reading workshop units of study: Anthologies, A Special List of Mentor Texts to Use When Teaching Writing that Also Make for Great Read-Alouds, Books Students Want on the Shelves Now, Biography, Expository Nonfiction, Fantasy, Historical Fantasy, Historical Fiction, Multicultural, Mystery, Narrative Nonfiction, and Social Issues.

For more information about these lists, along with many others, please visit our website at [www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com). To order from the lists referenced above, choose from one of the following options:

1. Call Booksource Publishing at 1-800-444-0435 and reference Lucy Calkin's TCRWP booklists.
2. Visit [www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com) to download the lists and mail your orders to 1230 Macklind Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63110.
3. Email Booksource Customer Service at [service@booksource.com](mailto:service@booksource.com).

## The Logistics of the Workshop: Establishing Routines and Expectations

---

Reading is a skill that requires practice. Just as a student learns to swim by swimming, and to play the piano by playing the piano, students need protected time to read to get better as readers. In every classroom, teachers will probably want to spend a bit of time at the start of the year stressing the importance of stamina and encouraging students to read for longer stretches of time, both in school and at home. Just as runners have goals to reach, readers also have goals. Students may learn that when they begin to lose stamina in their books, they can reread or look back over their Post-its for a moment before continuing. Readers can take brief breaks to think and then continue reading. They can set goals for themselves, as runners do. If students worked last year to develop stamina, you may make student testimonials central to your teaching. You may want to speak about the transformation of a particular reader from the previous year, or invite past students to come in and speak about their growth and attitude shift in reading. Consider the role of your prior students as transformational speakers! You may also emphasize the power of finding stolen moments throughout the day to read by highlighting that the readers carry books with them everywhere they go.

During the first few days of school, you will want to establish clear routines and expectations. You'll want to remind (or teach) students to gather quickly and efficiently for whole-class instruction, teaching this bit of management in a way that upholds the joy of reading. "We won't want to waste one precious moment of reading time, so this year, let's get really good at gathering efficiently for the minilesson." Similarly, if you want to emphasize the importance of students listening (and not constantly interrupting) during the minilesson, you could say, "This year, I want to be sure you have lots and lots of time to read the incredible books we have in this room, so let's try to keep our minilessons efficient. How about if you save your questions until the minilesson is over?"

This is a good time, too, for you to consider whether you have planned minilessons that are too long or complicated, that are usurping too much of students' reading time. Most teachers use the strategy of demonstration and, more specifically, of thinking aloud, in reading minilessons. If you do this, try to make the reading and thinking *feel* like *reading*, which usually means holding the book in your lap, reading aloud from the book, not from the overhead projector. You will want your thinking aloud to be very brief—usually no more than three sentences. Avoid rambling; if you see students start to tune out, take this as a cue. After watching you once or twice, students get the idea of what you are trying to show them, and they'll want a chance to try whatever you have demonstrated. You'll see the written story of scores of minilessons in *Building a Reading Life*, as well as a DVD containing four hours of snippets from classroom life, so you may want to lay your teaching up against that resource. Teach students to expect that although the minilesson will be an occasion to learn a new reading skill or strategy, during any one day's reading time, they will hopefully draw on *all* the skills and strategies they have been taught up to and including that day.

Of course, at the heart of your teaching will be the work that students do. Your teaching of reading won't amount to much until students are choosing just-right books and reading them with stamina. Unless students are reading books they can read with *at least* 96% accuracy, fluency, and strong comprehension, it is superfluous to worry about minilessons that teach strategies for identifying with characters or developing theories!

As mentioned earlier, if students have not yet been assessed and matched to books, and if you do not have the previous year's records to draw upon, you may need to put a bin of easier, high-interest books at the center of each table and set to work assessing your readers. Increasingly, though, teachers are sending students into classrooms with zippered bags of books in hand, selected in June of the previous year. If your students come to you with books they selected, with input from their prior teacher, you may want to bypass the start-of-the-year formal assessments for all but your strugglers, realizing that even if you do assess readers now, they tend to be rusty and they can probably progress pretty soon. You may, then, instead devote these first weeks to rigorous teaching and intimate conferences, keeping kids reading books that either were selected with support from their last year's teacher or books that match those, and then conduct in-book running records by the end of September to see if you can perhaps already move kids up a notch. Most of you will conduct formal running records in October, before parent-teacher conferences and before data needs to be entered into software that tracks student growth over time.

Either way, once you've determined books that are just right for a particular reader, you'll give that student a personal bin or bag in which he or she can keep a few just-right books. It helps to get the student started enjoying these books if you rave about a few you believe will be perfect for that student.

The books a student keeps in his or her bin will all be equivalent in level, except in two instances. First, an English language learner who is literate in his or her first language will read difficult books in the native language and easier books in English. Second, when a student is transitioning to a new book level, that student's book bin will contain books at both the comfort level and the new instructional level. Ideally, the latter will be books the teacher has introduced to the student; this works especially well if you introduce the first book in a series of two or three books because one book provides an introduction to the next. If a reader is working with a slightly more difficult text (96%, not 98% accuracy) this is an important time to be sure that the student's partner is reading the same slightly more challenging book, so the two partners can support each other.

You will also want to teach students procedures for keeping track of their volume of reading. Earlier we described the cumulative reading log, which is absolutely essential for you and for the reader. You will need to make sure these logs become integral to the reading workshop. Every day during reading time, each student needs to get his or her log out along with his or her book. Many September conferences will reference these logs. You might say, "I notice you've been reading faster. Has it been hard to hold onto the story as you read faster?" If a student's pace has slowed, you



might ask, “What’s slowing you down? I notice you read less today. What got in the way?” The log will also influence your observations. If you see from a glance at a student’s log that the student is making slow progress through a book, observe the student as she reads silently, checking for any noticeable reading behaviors that might be slowing the student’s pace. Does the student move her lips while reading, move her head from side to side, point at words as she reads, use a bookmark to hold her place as she reads, or read aloud to herself? If the student does any of these things, you will want to intervene. Tell her that she has graduated and no longer needs to engage in those behaviors. You may need to tell students that they should only read aloud when they come to tricky words. Or devise other strategies to help them get into the habit of reading silently.

It’s helpful to know how many pages a student can actually get through in half an hour of reading time. If, for example, we know that a student can read twenty pages of a 120-page *Amber Brown* book in half an hour of reading time, then we’d expect that student to read that much at home each night. At this rate, the student should finish this book after three days and nights of reading.

Usually teachers design systems for take-home reading. If nothing else, each student has a take-home book bag. The important thing is that the student needs to read the same book in home and at school, carrying the book between places. Often teachers suggest that in a partnership discussion, students give themselves assignments in school, such as: “Let’s read to page 75.”

Few things matter more in teaching reading than students progressing through books. To encourage slow readers, you might walk around at the beginning of the reading workshop, marking kids’ starting page numbers. Then you survey again during the middle of the workshop to jot down how many pages students have read. Lean in and encourage students to push themselves by saying, “Push your eyes across the page,” or “I love the way you read seven pages. See if you can read eight more.” Mostly, make sure they have books they love that they can understand. Kids who are holding books they adore get a lot of reading done.



## UNIT ONE

# Agency and Independence

## *Launching Reading with Experienced Readers*

**SEPTEMBER**

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: S)

### Overview

As your readers come of age in your school, your hope is, of course, that they become avid readers. In this process, they'll internalize lessons such as choosing books wisely, monitoring for comprehension, and keeping track of their reading. They'll also become experienced with the structures of reading workshop. As your school develops these kinds of readers, you'll want to make sure that you are helping them build on their prior skills and move forward with increasing power and independence. This unit, much of which is excerpted from the unit of study "Intellectual Independence" (you'll find it in its entirety in the final volume of *Units of Study for Teaching Reading—Constructing Curriculum: Alternate Units of Study*), aims to help readers engage intellectually with their books and with their reading lives right from the first day of school.

This unit assumes that your readers have been in strong reading workshops for at least a year or two. For the most part, your students meet many of the expectations outlined by the Common Core State Standards. They read with purpose and understanding and with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression. They have a repertoire of meaning-making strategies, such as using context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, and they reread when meaning breaks down.

That means you have a class full of readers most of whom are knowledgeable about the essential skills of reading. They know how to choose books they can read with ease; they pay attention to characters and to story elements in the stories they read; and they envision, predict, develop theories, and think across books as they read.

They also monitor for comprehension, and they have a repertoire of strategies to draw upon when the book gets hard in easy-to-solve ways. These readers don't have to necessarily be reading at higher reading levels. In this unit, written for more experienced and advanced readers, you'll teach your readers to draw upon what they know, thereby teaching them to self-initiate in ways that allow them to draw upon their repertoire of strategies.

If, on the other hand, you have a classroom of readers who are mostly new to reading workshop or still learning the crucial essentials of reading, reading mostly levels M/P/Q, then you'll want to turn to the unit of study described in the fourth-grade launch, which introduces readers to the work upon which they will build their whole reading lives. That unit, which draws upon *Building a Reading Life* from the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*, also gives you, as a teacher, the latest research on reading assessments and reading levels and on critical structures within your classroom.

## Carrying Essential Structures and Understandings Forward: Reading Records, Partnerships, Writing about Reading, and Reading Levels

---

When you envision your reading workshop, it's helpful to clarify some essential structures and how you want your readers to carry those forward with increasing independence. First, reading records. Your readers may be avid readers—they may have the look of those readers—they carry books, they know authors and series, they talk easily about what is happening in their books. They still need you to make sure that they are reading! But to move forward with increased agency, they need you to make sure that *they* make sure *they* are reading. So you'll want your students to sustain systems for keeping track of reading volume. Just as anyone who is immersed in becoming better at something keeps records, readers need a way to keep some statistics, so they can see how reading is going for them. According to the Common Core State Standards, volume in books is key to comprehension. Later in the unit, you'll find a lesson that compares baseball players and fans, and their obsession with statistics, with readers who know their own reading data. For now, keep in mind that you'll need to be ready with options for systems that you approve, or you'll need to let them develop their own systems. In that lesson, we'll use paper and pens to show how keeping a simple paper reading log can help you to reflect upon and transcend your reading history. There is no particular magic about what a log has to look like, though, beyond that there are some systems that teachers find easy and some systems that different kinds of school-age readers seem to like.

In earlier grades, we're pretty adamant about working within one kind of reading log. There is just so much to teach when you are teaching reading essentials that it's hard to make time to experiment with a variety of reading logs. If you were working with less experienced readers you could easily make the choice to have the same tools. However, in this unit, we're interested in teaching kids to develop agency over their reading life. Therefore, we'll teach them to make choices and to develop a sense

of self-discipline in this work. They'll make some mistakes along the way, and you can coach them to make better choices. Some methods that students have found productive for keeping track of their reading include a paper log that has columns for the date, title, time spent reading, pages read, and level. Clearly that form is easy for a teacher to use as well. Other readers have found that making a monthly calendar and putting the title of the book and the number of pages read on each date helps them to visualize across a month how reading is going. If you circle the title whenever you start a new book, you can see how many books you've read across the month. This system especially rewards pages over minutes—as readers grow it will be important for some readers to read for longer periods of time, if they are slower readers. It's the only way to get a lot of reading done. So a monthly calendar that shows the total number of pages a reader accomplished each day rewards volume. If the reader and teacher are interested in studying rate, then go ahead and enter the minutes too. Still other readers have enjoyed online and digital systems. There is a calendar and a spreadsheet available on smart phones. Goodreads.com is an online reading record that lets you show the book you are reading, the books you have finished, and the books that you plan to read next. What matters most is that you and your students have a clear understanding that statistics matter and that you develop and try out systems that your readers will sustain and use effectively.

You can also support readers in building reading lives by helping them develop reading relationships with others. Partnerships are *crucial* to success in reading. There is much evidence to suggest that comprehension skyrockets when students are given an opportunity to talk about books, even briefly. In partnerships, students have the opportunity, as reinforced in the Common Core State Standards, to build on others' ideas and express their own clearly and persuasively. Readers need everyday opportunities to discuss what they are reading—and you don't want them to depend on you to be that literary partner! Pretty much every single day a reader needs protected time for reading and protected time to talk to someone about what he or she has been reading, as well as what *work* he or she has been doing as a reader. That is, these partnership conversations are sometimes full of talk about what is happening in their books—all readers love to talk about the characters, places, and plots of their books, especially as the books get increasingly complex. You'd never deny readers this pleasure because it is intrinsic to reading. At the same time, you want your readers to be able to answer the question, What work are you doing as a reader? What are you investigating? And you want that answer to show that they are responding to your instruction, moving across what Norman Webb calls *depth of knowledge* levels, so that they move from recall to synthesis to analysis.

There are lots of ways to structure partnerships, and you want your readers to be part of those decisions now, if they are increasing their independence and expertise as readers. For lower-level readers, it's often helpful to partner readers who will read the same book, so they can co-construct their understandings, sharing reading goals and reading work. At the same time, productive partnerships often reflect reading interests—that is, readers who love the same authors, series, and genres are going to enjoy talking

to each other. They will share titles, and they will swap books. So some of your partnerships are not exactly matched by level, and they are not reading the same title, but they both love fantasy or war stories or animal stories. Still other partnerships may reflect friendships. In prior years, you may have tended to avoid making friends into reading partners, from a fear that friends may get distracted from work. Think about how much you like to work with your friends, and think about that notion of self-discipline. It's important to teach friends how to work and study together. In later years, when your students are in high school, it's unlikely that they'll call kids who they don't know or like to get help with a book or to read and study together. It will be such a benefit if they have learned to do academic work with their peers. Finally, some of your partnerships will reflect your urge to show kids that you can make friends through reading, that books will bring us together. Maybe you need one child to partner with another as a mentor. Maybe you want to help develop one students' habits by exposing that student to a successful reader. That is a valid choice too. Transparency in these choices will help your students to increase their independence. Helping them understand a variety of purposes for partnerships will help them seek partners who will help them move forward as readers.

If you do let your students make some choices in their partnerships, you can expect that some of those choices will not be perfect. That's your chance to help your students learn from those choices. If you make all the choices for them, they may have a productive partnership during your workshop, but they may not know how to choose and sustain partner work on their own. So help your students to understand what productive partner work looks like. With them, develop a vision of what you might hear and see as you listen in to partnerships. Then provide opportunities for them to create this vision.

Some partnerships may be ready, even right at the start of the year, for you to invite them to form small social groups around reading—informal, kid-sponsored book clubs. Fantasy readers may want to join together to read a new volume in a series, for instance. A few readers may want to read Judy Blume together or to tackle a new book by a favorite author. Your students, if they have been in reading workshop over the years, have been in many book clubs. They may need only the lightest invitation to seek out other readers and begin to function as clubs. You might say, "By the way, some of you seem to be reading the same authors or genres. You may want to seek each other out and launch a quick book club. Let me know if you need any help with that, and I'll let you know when I see another reader sharing your interests." At this time of year, you want to give all your time to reading, so give these informal, spontaneous clubs only the same time to talk that you would give partnerships, but encourage them to email and call each other or to meet at lunch. Or you may decide to reward them for doing extra reading outside of school, providing some conversation time together in your classroom. Your goal here is not to launch and sustain book clubs. Your goal would be to acknowledge that kids should be carrying all their reading skills forward from year to year, and most of them already participate in informal clubs all the time—they recommend books to each other, they swap books, and so on.

A word about writing about reading: if your readers are experienced, they know how to use their pencils as they read, to keep track of parts of their stories, to keep track of their thinking, and to develop new thinking. They have been keeping Post-its over the years. If they owned the books, we'd let them write in them, but in a community library, we use Post-its. With the increased use of technology, and more kids coming in with Kindles and Nooks, you may find that some of your kids are able to keep notes on their reading on these devices. As always, keep in mind that writing about reading does increase comprehension and retention for strong readers, as a recent Carnegie study showed. They don't have to write about every page, every chapter, or even every book—avid readers, frankly, read too much to do that. But when they are engaged in serious reading, they'll want to develop their thinking in ways that have visibility, so they can share it with other readers. They'll probably want a reader's notebook as a place to hold their Post-its, to write longer about reading, and to respond creatively and personally to their books. For readers who struggle, though, writing about reading may interfere with their reading volume. Pay attention—research with your kids how their reading volume develops and how their writing about reading supports their thinking work. If you find that a small group of students would benefit from specific teaching on what's worth jotting about, you might refer to *Building a Reading Life* from *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*.

Finally, reading levels and your library. As your readers become more knowledgeable and independent, you hope that they think of themselves not as “T readers,” but as fantasy readers, readers who love Judy Blume and all her books, or readers who love strong relationships and character development in any genre. That is, moving up reading levels is an underpinning of their work, but it is not the overall goal of their work. This understanding feels especially important with our more struggling readers who have often seen themselves only as a level. Helping them to see the strengths they carry within themselves is critical. Your library may reflect these interests, so that your baskets are arranged with series, authors, and genres prominent and the levels as the second part of the heading. Most series are within one or two levels across the series. Amber Brown is N/O. The Percy Jackson books are U/V. You want it to be easy for kids to find books they can read and easy for them to do smart reading work as well—to keep reading an author, series, and genre they are becoming passionate about. Your kids can help with organizing the library to reflect their interests and expertise.

If they are in this unit of study, then your kids should have come up from their prior year of reading, either with actual books in hand that they want to read (a bag of books they made the prior spring) or with knowledge of what they like to read and what levels mostly make sense for them. They should be able to begin reading right away. There is a lesson in this unit that helps students choose books wisely and monitor their own reading life. It aims to teach students how to carry their skills with them as the books get harder. It also acknowledges that sometimes a new genre may be more difficult, and that as kids get to higher reading levels, any single book may become somewhat hard to pin down as a W or X. So, readers need to pay attention as



they read and keep track of how their book choices help them to get a lot of reading done. You shouldn't, therefore, have to assess your kids formally at the beginning of the year, with the exception of new students or ones you are worried about.

Keep an eye on your readers, though. Watch over their shoulders for the first few days—help them to notice how many pages they are reading in class and at home. Listen in to their partner conversations. Engage them in conferences. Pay attention not only to volume, but to comprehension. Read the back blurb of their books, so you can match a basic knowledge of the story with what they say. Notice if they seem to not understand the setting, if they have been reading for a while and don't have many pages read, or if they can't tell you much of what makes the individual characters interesting and different from each other. If you're concerned about a reader, ask that reader to not only tell you about what he or she is reading but also to read part aloud. They may be able to fool you about their comprehension if you don't know the book, but it's unlikely they'll fool you with their fluency. So just as your kids need to carry forward all they know about reading, carry forward all you know as well. Pay special attention to any readers who read below grade level—any who didn't pass their state test, for instance, or whose prior teachers have alerted you to their reading status. These readers may need you to help them find books at their level and to assess them if you're unsure of their reading level.

## Part One: Helping Readers Develop Agency So They Can Lift Their Reading Lives into a New Orbit

---

In the first part of the unit, you'll need to inspire your students to take charge of their reading life in new and exciting ways. In your very first lesson, develop a metaphor that you can carry forward. In the launch lesson described fully in "Intellectual Independence," Ehrenworth describes to students how a rocket will accelerate upward to reach a higher orbit—it is propelled by thrusters, just as readers can propel themselves forward. She asks students to think about *any time* they were working to get better at something and to consider what they did to become better—at dancing, skateboarding, *Call of Duty*, anything! Your students will share techniques that they have used in the past, such as practicing and having a mentor. You'll give your own example that will help them see that they need a vision of what they want to become—and that they need to be ambitious and hardworking. This is where you'll develop the notion of *agency*. In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell describes the single condition that leads to young people becoming extraordinary adults: someone gave them the opportunity to work hard. Once you're at a certain skill level, it's all about work—for gymnasts, for piano players, for computer programmers, for excellence in any field. Teaching your students to work hard is one of the most crucial life-long habits that you can help them to develop. In this lesson you'll inspire your students to take charge of their reading life, and you'll give them an opportunity to share their ideas for how to move forward. This session is aligned to the Common Core State

Standards' call for students to become self-directed learners, seeking out and using resources as needed to make sense of what they are reading. Peers and teachers are kinds of resources, so you will remind readers that good reading does not happen in isolation. It is something we get better at when we work and learn alongside others.

In your next lesson, you may want to compare reading with being at a baseball game. When an expert on baseball watches a game, knows his statistics, understands the nuances of what is happening even when there are no home runs, the game is full of intrigue and fascination. Compare reading with that experience—just as a baseball game is more interesting to an expert than it is to a novice, so too is reading. A book reveals its secrets to an expert reader, who is alert to the small signals that a more novice reader might miss, such as the details that suggest certain histories about a character. You may want to read aloud a short, extremely skilled story such as Langston Hughes' "Thank You, Ma'am," in which every detail matters. As you read, ask your students to use everything they know about reading, all their strategies. Remind them of what they know about how stories go, so they expect to pay attention to and talk about what they notice about the characters, what they infer about their histories and traits, what they think about how the characters change and the implications of these changes. Essentially, you are alerting your students that from the very beginning of this year, they will carry forward their expertise, and stories will reveal more to them.

In your following lesson, you may want to revisit the skill of choosing books wisely. You won't teach this skill as if it were new, though. You'll ask students to study themselves and to recall what they know about how to choose books. Move them past younger tricks such as the "five finger rule" in which they just looked at vocabulary. Help them see what they know about choosing authors and genres that they are passionate about. If they don't recall this work, remind them how much the covers and blurbs tell you about a book. Show them how to read within the book for a moment—but only show them these things if they miss one or two strategies. First see how much they already know, and get them to carry that knowledge forward. Your real goal here is to simply remind them that as expert readers, they'll be choosing books with extraordinary foresight, knowledge, and intention!

Now, a lesson on reading logs! For this lesson, you'll need a brief log filled out, with one week in which you got a lot of reading done. Put some books on there that go together, perhaps a popular series you want to forward, or some adult mystery novels that will intrigue readers, showing what an adult reading life will look like for them. Fill your log with extra times when you read, such as late at night, on the bus, and so on. Have your volume and rate be high. Then explain to your students how, whenever someone is becoming better at something, they keep statistics. Compare baseball players, who are obsessed with stats. Give a personal story, about training for a race, when you wanted to keep track of your distance and time. Or changing your diet, when many people keep track of what they eat and how much. Then invite your readers to study your stats. Partnerships can come up with observations about how reading is going for you from this week's log. They'll infer that reading was going very

well, that you seemed fascinated by your novels, that you seemed to be reading books that helped you to read a lot. You may want some of those books with you, so you can show kids how much you loved them, and how you read a lot because these were the kinds of books that kept you up at night. Show the kids a second week on your log. On this one, have some difficult books, perhaps a genre you struggle with, and have the time you spent reading rapidly decrease. Also show a low rate, with few pages read and lots of rereading. Your students will infer that reading did not go so well for you! They'll also see how a reader is not just a *good* reader. A reader varies in success, and statistics help us keep track of how reading is going and what kinds of books seem to help us read more. After studying your log, let your readers loose on their own logs, and create a protected time each week or two when they can meet with a partner to study their own statistics. They can also study what kinds of reading logs help them keep track of their reading with ease. They'll be using charts and graphs in science and math—so doing these kinds of research studies on themselves should make sense to them.

Finally, you'll probably want to teach your students some methods for retelling their books to their partners, at a more inferential level. The Common Core State Standards suggest that fifth graders "quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text." Your students may be used to simply recalling events. Using a movie as an example, or a read-aloud text, you can show your students how to actually *analyze* the story before describing it to a partner. If the story is complex, with different storylines, and various characters, they may want to focus on *synthesizing* these narrative lines. Or they could analyze the characters' motivations and the causes for their behaviors, describing only certain pivotal moments in the story that seem to reveal much about the character. Or they may want to *investigate* certain themes that seem to arise in their books. These readers have been in interpretation units and book clubs before! Teach them to make decisions about how they will shape their partner talk, so that their literary conversations help them move up Webb's Depth of Knowledge levels, from recall to synthesis to analysis.

## Part Two: Teaching Readers to Read Between the Lines

---

In this part of the unit, you'll teach your readers some skills that will help them continue to move forward as readers. You'll need a read-aloud text in which reading between the lines pays off right away—something like *Edward's Eyes*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, or *The Notebook of Melanin Sun*. Then too, you might select a collection of short stories, such as those in *First French Kiss* or *Every Living Thing*. Teach your readers to pay attention to who is telling the story, the narrator, and to infer about that narrator—show them how, as their books get more complex, readers begin to put details together right away. In *Edward's Eyes* the narrators shows himself to be someone who loves deeply, who is somewhat alienated from his parents, but is closely tied to

Edward, who is adept at language and who notices detail. The narration is in the first person, which also matters for how you get to know the character—it's through his own words, what he tells, how he says it, and what he withholds. In "Thank You, Ma'am," on the other hand, you are looking at the characters from the outside, since the narration is third person, and so it is a different kind of getting to know them.

As you teach your readers to read between the lines, you'll want to show them how to withhold judgment, to understand that their understanding is partial. In complex novels and stories, characters change over time or reveal themselves slowly, which means our understanding of them changes. Teach your readers to analyze what they think they know about a character and how that changes as the novel develops.

You'll also want to teach your readers to imagine the scenes in their stories, as well as the scenes that come between scenes! That is, some scenes are intensely descriptive, and younger readers may tend to bleep over those, eager for the next action. But in more complex novels, a lot happens that isn't just in the action scenes. Usually there is a reason that a vivid description is included—it slows down the action and changes the mood, asking the reader to linger in it. Invite your readers to find these scenes and to really picture them, so that they can better imagine the physical and psychological state, the *mood* of that part of the novel. Then show your readers how, at times, a chapter jumps ahead to a different moment or place in time. When this happens, you have to rapidly, almost without thinking, imagine what came between. Did a week pass? A night? Is the place the same? Is the mood different? Astute readers do that work almost automatically, but you'll want to show your readers this reading-between-the-lines work.

Another way that readers pay attention in complex texts is that they make connections across parts of the story that are not right alongside each other. That is, sometimes references are made to something that happened quite a bit earlier in the story. Moments are connected across dozens, or even hundreds, of pages. Choose a few of these scenes to show how you realize that a character's behavior in one moment is shaped by something that came long before, or how a character makes a reference, and it is to something that was depicted much earlier in the novel. This kind of synthesis work is crucial to reading complex texts.

### Part Three: Talking about Books: The Art of Literary Conversation

---

Your readers will be used to talking to a partner about their books. In this part of your unit, you can act as if you are coaching into these conversations, while you are really also continuing to teach reading skills. What we talk about when we discuss books is intimately related to our insights and interests as a reader. One lesson you may want to teach is that readers often use their pencils as they read, to deepen their engagement with their novels. Remember in college, how you annotated your books in the margins? Show your students a novel that has that kind of annotation, with the "this goes back to page 83!" and "reminds me of *Catcher in the Rye* because he seems so

lonely, so isolated, and yet yearns to be more . . .”—all those small notes that marked your mind working as a reader and that showed you were preparing to talk about the book, whether in a conversation or in a paper. In school, few of our readers own the books—they are community property. So usually readers use Post-its and reader’s notebooks to record and develop their thinking. You’ll probably want to show your readers how sometimes readers write “short,” as in they are making quick jottings as they read, so that they remember their thinking. Highlight that readers do this before the book changes and their thinking changes. Then too, teach them that sometimes readers write “long,” really reflecting and developing their thinking.

As your readers begin to have more to say about their books because they are using writing to develop ideas, show them how passionate readers talk about their books with depth and zeal. Demonstrate how our job is to make our partner fall in love with, or be intrigued by, the book. Any zealous reader wants another reader to read, or want to read, the same book. We accomplish that task by talking about it in such a way that we make it fascinating. And we don’t give away the ending—we withhold that part if our friend is going to read the book, and we have that conversation once we’re both caught up. Those literary conversation moves are worth modeling and practicing and celebrating.

As your readers begin to really value their literary conversations and to prepare them with fluency and insight, you’ll also want to teach them how to talk about more than one book at a time. You may show them how to deeply compare novels, for their intent, their characters, their structures, and their themes. And you may show your readers the art of the allusion—the reference in conversation to a familiar text that is part of cultural literacy—you could, for instance, compare a character in one novel to Charlotte in *Charlotte’s Web*, and everyone would know that character was loyal, self-sacrificing, and intelligent. Use your read-aloud texts as common texts for this work, as well as novels that kids read together in prior years. You can also use Harry Potter, which has entered our cultural heritage as a global text. There is another kind of allusion that is worth describing as well. That is what the Common Core State Standards describe as the literary tradition of a text, or its context. For instance, you might refer to Harry Potter not only as a compelling novel but as a ground-breaking fantasy and compare it to *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*—your kids don’t have to read those novels, but you can show them how novels are often part of a literary tradition. Sometimes understanding that tradition gives readers new insights into their novels and new paths in their discussions.

Another surprising way to develop your readers’ skills is to work on fluency, only you may call it “reading aloud with power and grace.” To read aloud, the reader has to understand what is happening in the novel, what came before, the mood, the characters’ traits and emotions, and the shifting emotions of the scene. Rasinski describes fluency as the surest and quickest marker of understanding. Kylene Beers adds “prosody” to this work, asking kids to pay attention to the connotations of words and to phrasing and thus to their intonation as they read. You are someone who knows

how to read aloud with drama and deep understanding. Share that skill with your students.

Finally, you'll want to make time at the end of your unit of study for readers to reflect on where they are as readers and how reading has been going for them. Give them a chance to get out their reading logs and use their statistics to analyze their reading life with a partner. Have them look across their Post-its and notebook entries to see what kind of thinking they have been developing. Show them how to reflect on what authors, genres, and kinds of novels they are most enjoying and which they are still intrigued by but haven't tackled. Then create an opportunity for students to make insightful, personal reading plans, which may involve other readers in shared work. They may seek out other fantasy readers for informal book club meetings, they may decide to continue with an author and form an informal author study. They may decide to work on getting more reading done by adding in more variety of texts to their reading life. What matters is that, when we are working hard at something, we take time to reflect on how it is going and to shape our plans in the company of others.

## Additional Resources

---

As you approach this unit, it will be important for you to read the entire write-up, not just the teaching points below, because ultimately kids learn through the work they do, not the words out of your mouth. So the really important thing in a unit of study is that you have created opportunities for kids to engage in work that matters. The unit write-up can help you issue the wide, generous invitation that rallies kids not only to work with heart and soul, but to also engage in deliberate practice, trying to get better at specific skills that the unit aims to highlight. But in the end, a good portion of your teaching will revolve around the responsive instruction you provide as you move kids along trajectories of skill development. This part of your teaching relies on you assessing your students often—not in big fancy ways, but by watching the work they do—and you seeing their work as feedback on your teaching. If you have taught something and only a handful of kids are able to do that work to good effect, then you'll want to decide whether that skill was essential, whether you want to reteach it in a new way, or whether you want to detour around it. You'll want to become accustomed to fine-tuning your teaching through an attentiveness to student work, because the work your students do is not just showing you what they can do and can't do, it is also showing you what *you* can do. From this attentiveness to student work and from your own persistence to reach students, one way or another, and your inventiveness in response to what they do, you'll find that your teaching itself becomes a course of study for you as well as for your students.



## Teaching Points from "Intellectual Independence," from *Constructing Curriculum: Alternate Units of Study, in Units of Study for Teaching Reading*

---

### Part One: Helping Readers Develop Agency So They Can Lift Their Reading Lives into a New Orbit

- "The most important thing I can teach you today is that whenever a person wants to really become more powerful at something—*anything*—the learner needs to consciously take hold of his own life and say, 'I can decide to work hard at this. I'm *in charge* of this. Starting today, I'm going to make deliberate decisions that help me to learn this skill in leaps and bounds so that I can be as powerful as possible.' That's called learners having *agency*. People who have agency *strive*—they work independently and incredibly hard at something to achieve."
- "Today I want to teach you that one way we can read actively and with agency is by relying on our knowledge of how stories go. Because we know a lot about stories, we know it is important that as we read, we get to know our characters and look for the problems they face, including the nuances of these problems, as well as remain alert to how problems are resolved and how characters change."
- "Today I want to teach you that we need to work hard to make smart choices about what we read to build an extraordinary reading life. One way we work at making smart choices is to research the books we plan to read so that we choose wisely."
- "Readers, today I want to teach you that powerful readers use artifacts to help us reflect on and improve our reading lives. One artifact that is incredibly useful as a tool for reflection is the reading log, which helps us keep track of how reading is going for us. It's concise, it's easy to sustain, and it has tons of information that lets us reflect wisely on ourselves as readers."
- "Readers, today I want to teach you that telling someone else, or ourselves, what has happened so far in our story is a crucial way to make sense of and hold on to that story. It may be some of the most important reading work we do because we have to think back over the parts of the story, decide what's important so far, and then make decisions about what to share. One way we can work harder at this important work is to make *conscious decisions* about *how* to retell a story—it's part of having agency as a reader, matching our *method* for retelling to the reading work we want to do."

## Part Two: Reading between the Lines and Coauthoring the Text

- “Readers, today I want to teach you that one way to lift our reading to the next level is to concentrate on reading for *subtext* as well as for *text*. One way to do this is, at the start of a story, is to work really hard to read between the lines, to imagine what the details *suggest*, or imply, about the characters or the place. Stories tend to start by giving lots of details either about the characters or about the place.”
- “Readers, today I want to teach you that the kinds of books you are reading now demand imaginative readers, readers who will pause and create those vivid images. One way we construct those images is to work hard at releasing our imaginations as we read, paying attention to details in the story and filling in with more imagined sights, sounds, and atmosphere until it’s as if we can envision the moment as a scene in a film.”
- “So what’s important is that today I want to teach you that strong readers are alert to shifts in time and place, and we imagine the moments in between the scenes that are written in the stories we are reading. Readers often find it helpful to turn to setting clues to see if time has passed or the setting has changed—then we know that we have imaginative work to do if we want the story to keep making sense.”
- “Readers, today I want to teach you that one way the stories you are reading will get more complicated is that there will be references to other parts of the book or to an earlier book in the series, and readers need to work harder to understand the references and see the meaningful connections between parts of a story. Things that are said or that happen in one part of the story may refer to earlier events, earlier parts—and these events or parts may be separated by many pages. They may even refer to something in another book in the series.”
- “Today I want to teach you that when a book gets hard, readers work even harder. One way we do this is to use the repertoire of crucial strategies we already know that help us work through difficulty.”

## Part Three: The Art of Literary Conversation

- “Readers, today I want to teach you that readers develop a variety of ways to use writing to respond to their books. Sometimes we write short and sometimes long. We make purposeful decisions about what to write on and how much to write.”

- “Today I want to teach you that just as there is writing craft, there is craft for talking about books. It mostly involves two things—passion and insight. You know what passion is. Anyone who passionately adores a book will probably talk about it well. Insight is literally seeing inside the heart of the story in the same way you do when you read between the lines.”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers talk about more than one book at a time as part of the art of literary conversation. One way we do this is to work hard at reaching back to recall stories we’ve read so that we can make comparisons. Sometimes these are deep comparisons, and we do a fair amount of retelling and analyzing. Other times we make allusions, which are quick comparisons to familiar texts—characters and stories that a community knows.”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers study how to read aloud with power and grace as an essential reading skill. One way we do this is to choose a small section of a familiar text and really rehearse it, living within the lines of the story and thinking about how to use our voice to enhance the meaning and emotions of the story.”
- “Today I want to teach you that good readers use artifacts, such as reading logs, to reflect on their reading lives and make plans for how to outgrow themselves as readers. One way we do this work is to analyze our reading logs like researchers, studying what kinds of books are getting us to read more, which genres or authors we are becoming passionate about, and how our reading habits are supporting our endeavors to become more powerful—and if there are any we need to fix up!”



## UNIT TWO

# Following Characters into Meaning

## *Synthesize, Infer, and Interpret*

### OCTOBER

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: S/T)

Whereas September spotlighted sophistication, with a rally to students to author more powerful independent reading lives and to think and talk with greater insight and nuance, October is all about interpretation. During the first portion of the unit, you will invite readers to build on the work they began last month, using their growing penchant complexity to now think about their books from an interpretive stance. Your fifth graders will naturally continue to predict and envision, just as they did earlier in the year, but they'll do so now with an eye toward theorizing about the characters in their books. During the first part of this unit you will ask them to formalize this thinking, generating theories about the characters they encounter. By doing this work, readers will develop their skills of synthesis and inference. You will develop an understanding of a pathway of skill development and become skilled at using performance assessments and feedback to determine where students lie on that pathway and how to move them along. In the next portion of the unit, you will teach students to grow their theories into big ideas about characters as they develop thinking that is both more precise and more complex. Finally, during the third portion of the unit, you will set students up to think interpretively across texts, considering how two or more authors explore similar themes, each in particular ways. Across this part, your students' fledgling theories will build in complexity. Rather than focusing merely on cross-text character similarities and differences, in this final part students will think about larger perspectives and messages, determining a story's theme and comparing and contrasting the distinct ways in which several authors (or several texts) address like themes. Your goal, by the end of the unit,

will be for readers to move fluidly between nose-in-the-book, totally engaged, aesthetic reading and the more “professorial,” analytic, and efferent reading.

This unit is detailed in the series *Units of Study for Teaching Reading: A Curriculum for the Reading Workshop*. If your students have not yet experienced this unit, you will probably choose to rely more heavily on the two *Following Characters into Meaning* books than on this write-up, adding in some of the final part as described in this document. The unit uses Kate DiCamillo’s beautiful book, *The Tiger Rising*, as the touchstone text. If your students have already heard that book in a read-aloud (or if you don’t love that book as we do), then by all means, select a different read-aloud to function as the thread that weaves together your unit. If your students have already experienced that unit, as scaffolded by those books, then this write-up can help you stand on the shoulders of that work, leaning especially on the second of the two books.

## Rally Your Students around This Unit’s New Goals

---

At the start of any unit, it is important to clarify the unit’s reading goals. Youngsters will hear that this is a unit on “characters,” and that topic will seem so concrete and clear to them that they’ll be ready to get started, no question. You, on the other hand, will probably want to give the focus of the unit a bit of thought because although characters are crucial in any story, there is no reading skill called “characters.” The *students* will think this is simply a unit on characters, but *you* will know that this is a unit on a set of reading skills that you’ll bring forth as they read fiction, thinking and caring about characters. Those skills can be chosen by you, the teacher. However, in this write-up and in the *Units of Study* book we support you in the teaching of the inter-related skills and complex analysis of characters using envisionment, prediction, inference, and interpretation.

The start of any new unit should rally students toward the big exciting work ahead. If they are to embrace a new unit with resolve and enthusiasm, then they must have a sense that the work of the unit offers a new slant. So you will want to figure out how to differentiate this year’s work from the work your students have done in previous years. Will you say that last year they studied *characters*, and this year you hope they study relationships, friendships, struggle? The journeys that characters experience, both externally and internally, in a book? Or how to at first live as a character and later step out of that character’s shoes to grow big ideas about the character?

Keep in mind that although you will rally readers to do *new* work, you’ll also need to remind them to continue doing all you have already taught. That is, your teaching must be cumulative. On Day Three or so of this new unit, remind students that they should be carrying all that you taught last month with them now. If you emphasized keeping daily logs, it is crucial that you don’t forget those logs now! If you emphasized that each reader in the class make it his or her goal to author a unique reading life, while learning from each other’s lives as readers, you will want to continue to thread that emphasis throughout this upcoming unit. The goal is that students don’t

abandon reading habits or skills they acquired in Unit One as they learn new skills. Remember, one of the most important things you emphasized in the last unit is that high volume of reading is crucial for growing readers. No matter what, you will want to make sure that the work of this unit does not overwhelm your students' reading. Make sure that your children continue to actually read, eyes on print, for forty minutes each day in school and for close to that same amount of time at home. This high volume of reading will support your students in reaching the goal of reading independently on level with purpose and understanding, as described by the Common Core State Standards.

## Thinking about Structures You Rely on in This Unit (and Others)

---

The unit is easier to provision than some because readers can grow ideas about characters when reading any fiction book at all, so you do not need a specialized library. Although your teaching may emphasize different skills and strategies as you move across the unit, what will be consistent throughout is that students will be engaged in similar work—they will be reading, reading, and reading more fiction books. Keep in mind the number of books you expect students to read a week is different according to the levels of the books in their hands. For example, readers in level K should be reading eight to ten books per week; readers in levels L/M, six per week; N/O/P/Q, two to four per week; in R/S/T, they'll read from one to two per week, depending on the length of the book, and readers in U and V books will likely read a book a week. Either way, they'll be reading a lot—and this matters more than anything else in this curricular calendar.

It is also important that readers meet with a partner for five minutes or so at the end of every day's reading workshop. Depending on the availability of books in your classroom library, partners might read duplicate copies of the same books or, alternatively, they might read different books and then swap upon completion. If partners have a character in common, the conversation can focus on the shared characters, which will invite discussion of the similarities and differences of characters in their books. They might use conversations that grow theories by addressing the motivations and behaviors of different characters as well as how the characters' relationships ebb and flow depending on who each is and what challenges and joys the author has created. These discussions will support the third point addressed by the Common Core State Standards for fifth grade, which states that students should "compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact)."

You can teach partners to ask each other questions such as:

- "What kind of person is the character? In what ways is he (or she) the same or different from other characters?"



- “Do you like or relate to one character more than you do to another? In what ways?”
- “Why did the character do that? Why did other characters react in different ways?”
- “How come the character is feeling that way? Do other characters feel differently? Why?”
- “Do you think he (or she) did the right thing?”
- “What do the interactions between two characters tell you about each?”
- “What do you think will happen next?”

Notice that these questions will push your children to do some of the reading skill work of the unit. They are not questions that can be answered with one word, and they push students to say what they think versus what happened in the text.

To further sustain partner talk, pushing students to build more ideas and make complex analysis, ask students to prepare for conversations with partners by rereading whatever jottings they have made thus far as they read, whether those jottings are in a reader’s notebook or on Post-its and theory charts. Teach partners to listen to and extend each other’s remarks, perhaps using conversational prompts such as:

- “What in the text makes you say that?”
- “I thought that too because. . . .”
- “Another example of that is. . . .”
- “I thought something different because. . . .”
- “I agree because. . . .”
- “Wait. I’m confused. Are you saying . . . ?”
- “Have you found the same thing with the character in your story?”
- “Can you say more about that?”
- “Can you show me the part in the story where you got that idea?”

While teaching into partnerships, you may find it helpful to reference Session VIII of *Following Characters into Meaning*. This session provides strategies for showing readers how partnerships talk. The mid-workshop teaching point in this session helps readers to rehearse for grand conversations by going back to their notes and selecting a jotting that is a thought, not simply a restating of a fact from the text. We know that when partnerships come together to talk about ideas, their conversations are richer and their thinking grows and changes. When done thoughtfully and openly, talk can help readers to grow more powerful and provocative ideas. In *The Art of Teaching Reading*, Calkins suggests that the definition of a good conversation is that your thinking grows or changes. During the character unit we must seize teaching opportunities to show students the power of talk.

Whole-class conversations are a wonderful way to support partner conversations. You can provide high amounts of scaffolding, and with this help, students can grow a conversation by sticking to just an idea or two. This means that when you finish reading aloud a chapter, you may want to ask, “Can someone get us started in a conversation about this chapter?” Teach readers that great book talks begin with ideas that are central to the text and provocative enough to merit conversation. Once a child makes a comment, give everyone time to mull over that comment for a moment and even to look at the text or jot notes. Then you might ask, “Who can talk back to this idea?” Students can then try sticking to that idea, using evidence from the text to support their thinking. Coach them to listen and then talk back to each other. The Common Core State Standards for speaking and listening purport that students in grades four to eight should be able to “report on a text presenting an opinion sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and relevant descriptive details to support their themes or ideas.”

As you prepare for the unit and think about structures you’ll put into place, be sure you keep in mind your students’ reading levels. Remember that readers who were assessed a few weeks ago could well be ready to move up to more challenging books already. Some of them will have entered the year rusty from a summer without reading and, after just a few weeks of reading up a storm, will be ready to move up to another level of text difficulty. The good news is that they’ll be continuing to read fiction books this whole month, so now is a good time to think about challenging students who are ready to read more complex texts while you remain in a familiar genre. You needn’t do fancy running records on assessment passages to move kids up—instead, ask them to read aloud bits of a leveled book and listen for fluency and accuracy, and then talk to determine comprehension. If their speed at moving through books has increased, that, too, can be sign they’re ready to move up. You will probably want to give readers “transitional baggies” containing some of the easier books at their new text level. You will also want to provide extra support in these new, higher-level books. You may provide students with the support of same-book partnerships and book introductions. If you or a parent can read some chapters aloud to the reader, this, too, offers help. Series books are especially good for supporting readers as they move to harder levels. It is likely that as you enter this unit, more children will be in

transitional baggies than not, but if you notice that some students are stagnating at a certain text level, then this should be a sign that they need some extra teaching and guidance in small groups and in conferences.

## Part One: Building Theories about Characters

---

During the first part of this unit, you'll emphasize that readers read closely, inferring to grow and formulate theories about the character. Those theories then help readers to predict how the book will unfold. Readers read on, discovering if their understandings of the characters were deep enough to support wise predictions.

We often launch this work by teaching young people that in life, as well as in books, **we watch how people act, noticing especially how they respond to events.** From this, we formulate tentative theories about them. You might say something like, "I noticed the way you all pulled together the other day when Jeremy was hurt. I saw Randalio making a bandage out of a paper towel, and from his actions I got the idea that he is quick-thinking and resourceful. And I watched the way Leo kept out of everyone's way and then found quiet ways to help, and I thought, 'That's just the way Leo acts during morning jobs, too.' I saw a pattern! So I thought, 'This gives me the idea that Leo is observant, and that his quietness helps him be especially thoughtful.'" Then you could debrief by saying something like, "Do you see how I made theories about Leo and Randalio based on their actions? Readers do that too." You can tell children that just as we grow theories about people around us, we can also grow theories about characters in books. You may want to look at Session IX in *Following Characters into Meaning*, which details this work.

**As students start to pay attention to characters' actions, it is important to emphasize that readers pay attention not only to *what* a character does but also to *how* the character does these things. Does the text give any clues about the character's gestures?** About the way a character walks or sits or closes the door? So, too, you may want to teach readers to consider why a character acts in a certain way.

If the text says that a character slumps in the chair, then the reader needs to not just see that in her mind but to ask, "Why does she sit like that? Is she tired? Bored? What's going on?"

Teaching students that readers also pay attention to the way characters think and talk will help students understand their characters more intimately. You may teach students to pay attention to how characters interact with one another through dialogue, noting the words their characters choose, their tone of voice, and other emotional cues. You may also point out that sometimes the author offers windows into a character's mind by writing passages exposing character's thoughts or offering an explanation of a character's motives.

The strategies may sound relatively straightforward, but children often struggle trying to do this work. Many children need to be taught that readers glean information about a character not only from passages pertaining directly to that character but

also from other passages—those telling about the character’s home, for example, or the character’s family. You might say to students, “Let’s read this story together and think, ‘Which part tells me something about Rob?’” Then proceed to show that passages describing Rob’s home provide windows into his character.

As children come to understand more and more about the characters in their books, they may notice that a character acts in a surprising manner or that he has inconsistencies. Teach them that characters are complicated; they are not just one way. Especially as readers progress toward more complex texts, characters will have many sides to them and will act differently in different situations. Then too, characters change. Either way, a reader will need to read on in the text, thinking, “Do these new sections of the text confirm or challenge my ideas about the character?” You may teach readers to grow ideas about characters by modeling how to think between several related sections of a text—say, a passage at the start, one at the middle, and one at the end—to talk and think very specifically about a character’s evolution across the storyline. Children tend to rely on sweeping generalizations when talking about the ways a character changes or the lessons a character learns, and our goal is to teach children to grow grounded, accountable, and, especially, precise ideas. We can teach children to think precisely in part by teaching them to reflect when a character acts out of character, thinking, “I wonder why the author might have made the decision to have the character do this?” and then trying to answer that question with some specificity.

As part of this interpretive work, it is important to teach readers to use their knowledge of how stories tend to go. By thinking about story structure, they will focus on what’s worth noticing in a story and keep in mind how their characters change. In literature, stories are often built around a central structure in which a main character faces challenges, some explicit and some more nebulous. The character draws on what’s inside himself or herself to meet these challenges and often changes in the process, developing new inner resources. Often, not only the main character changes, but other characters do as well. By comparing and contrasting how different characters are affected by one event, readers come to realize that events in stories are consequential; the choices made by one character affect others, and single events often have a significant impact on other events.

Students at this point will be thinking about characters with an eye toward complexity. You’ll now want to teach them that the story will *tell* specific actions, and that from those, readers can *infer* specific meaning. If the story says that Robert started his essay five times, each time crumpling his discarded lead into a wad, then the author is expecting that the reader will infer meaning about this character. The author does not need to come right out and say “Robert is a perfectionist.” The reader may not find descriptive words in the text but must instead bring those words to the text. Many children will reach first for generic terms: a character is “nice,” “mean,” or “good.” You may find it helpful to create a literary word chart so that children realize that a nice character might be “generous” or “encouraging” or “loyal” or “patient.” A mean character, on the other hand, might be “intolerant” or “snide” or “jealous” or even “malicious.” Some teachers have their kids rate the synonyms for nice along a gradient of

niceness for children to begin to grasp the nuances of each synonym. A child who has marked passages in a story that reveal the character's traits can profit from being invited to reach for the precisely true word that captures the character's personality.

In helping young readers grow ideas about characters, you will want to consider your understanding of bands of text difficulty. For example, readers who are working with K/L/M texts will probably find that those texts feature one or two main characters, each of whom is characterized by a couple of dominant character traits, which are usually very much related to the story line. For example, in the Poppleton series, Cherry Sue is overly friendly and generous, and the story line is that Poppleton eventually decides he's had enough of her generosity and wants a bit of space from her. It will not require a lot of inference for readers of these texts to deduce what their characters are like as people. These characters won't tend to change, either, although their feelings will. Meanwhile, once readers are reading texts in the N/Q band of text difficulty, characters will become more ambivalent. They'll simultaneously feel two contradictory emotions. At this band of text difficulty, it is common for a character to change at the end of the story. Characters in texts at the R/S/T level of text difficulty are multi-dimensional. If a reader were to sum up Sistine by saying, "She is a tough cookie," they will have discounted whole chunks of the text that show an entirely different side of her. Readers will want to mull over why characters act differently in different situations.

There are various note-taking strategies that will help students generate and hold onto their ideas about characters. As they move into conversations with their partners about their characters, their jottings will help sustain those dialogues. When you teach children to think about the protagonist's traits, motivations, problems (or struggles), lessons, and/or changes, suggest that they keep Post-its (and perhaps "theory charts") as they read, and that they meet for five minutes with a partner at the end of every reading workshop to "talk off their Post-its." If students need help generating better notes, ask them to do something simple such as star the Post-its they think show especially deep thinking. Then have them articulate what it was about that particular Post-it that made it work. Now they can use it as a mentor Post-it, which can act as a model for new notes they will produce as they move through their text.

Yet another way to lift students' thinking is to teach them that they can push themselves and their partners to bigger ideas by using particular patterns of talk, including frameworks in which to carry on conversations and questions and phrases to prompt deeper thinking. If children are accustomed to working with boxes-and-bullets (see *Breathing Life into Essays* in the series *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5*), help them jot main ideas in a boxes-and-bullets form as they prepare for partner conversations. Once they meet with a partner, teach them that one child can get the conversation started by sharing something provocative and central to the text, and then the partner can listen and extend the remark, perhaps using conversation prompts such as these:

- "What in the text makes you say that?"
- "I thought that too because. . . ."

- “Another example of that is. . . .”
- “I thought something different because. . . .”
- “I agree because. . . .”
- “Wait. I’m confused. Are you saying . . . ?”
- “Have you found the same thing with the character in your story?”
- “Can you say more about that?”
- “Can you show me the part in the story where you got that idea?”

You will note that these are once again the same prompts we taught our students earlier. Reminding them to use moves they already have instead of always teaching the next new thing can help reinforce skills and build confidence in our students. You will want to encourage partners to “talk long” about an idea because what they are doing as they extend a conversation is learning to think in some depth. This work supports the first Common Core Standard, which states that readers should be able to ask and answer questions that demonstrate an understanding of a text, explicitly referring to the text as the basis for the answers.

At this point in the unit, you will have taught students multiple strategies for developing theories about character. Students will have discovered which work best for them and used them to develop big ideas about characters. Now you will want to teach students that those theories are not stagnant. Once children have developed a theory or multiple theories, teach them to read on, expecting that these will become more complex and analytical (which generally means longer, with qualifiers added) or that they will change. It’s crucial to teach children to revise their initial ideas in light of new information. One way students might develop and change their theories is by using more precise language as they learn more information about their characters. Session XIII in *Following Characters into Meaning* shows readers how using more specific language to express thinking can help to evolve or deepen an idea. By reaching for a precise word to describe a character, for example, children are able to convey their ideas about that character with greater accuracy, which in turn allows them to speak with real insight and greater empathy. You’ll probably want to teach children that as readers move further along in a text, they gain new information that helps them speak with greater specificity about the characters and the story. For example, children who are early on in *The Tiger Rising* might be tempted to label Sistine “snotty” or “rude” or the generic “mean.” Once they read a bit further, however, and push themselves to reach for more precise language to describe Sistine, they may find themselves saying that she is “tough as nails” on the outside or “brazen” or “prickly” but that she is also “passionate” and “easily hurt” and “soft” on the inside. Precise



language also allows children to think with nuance and to read with more alertness to language and to their own thinking about stories. This is critical to helping children become more flexible and complex readers.

## Part Two: Theme (from Inference toward Interpretation)

---

The second part of this unit is a natural segue from inference work to interpretation. By now your students will have developed valuable skills that will carry them forward as they begin this new part of work, in which they synthesize their thinking and push themselves to develop big ideas about their characters and their books that they can support with moments and inferences they have made earlier, and to make sure they are revising their thinking as they read. This work edges toward theme and creates a strong foundation not only for interpretation but for later reading units such as the thematic text set unit.

If your students are anything like the ones we meet in schools where we work, their notebooks and books will be bursting with jottings and Post-its by this point, just as their minds will be brimful of ideas. You might want to begin, just as Session XIV of *Following Characters into Meaning* begins, with a session on pausing in the midst of reading to organize one's thoughts. You can teach children that one way to do this is to build piles of related thoughts or Post-it notes. Not only will this help children get a handle on their many ideas, but it will also lay the groundwork for the rest of this part, giving children practice at finding threads of thought. You can show students a variety of ways they might choose to sort their Post-its. They might, for example, sort Post-its into piles that are about one particular character or another, about one event in the book, or about a certain relationship in the book. You will then teach your students to look for patterns and new ideas within this stack of related Post-its. Teach them that when we look at a series of ideas, we ask ourselves, "What do these have in common? What is different about these ideas?" "If I was getting to know someone and these were my observations of them, how would I see them?" Once students have developed a couple of theories, they can revisit earlier parts of the text in light of their theories. They can also read forward, gathering more evidence to support their theories, making individual theory charts.

You might want to demonstrate how to sort Post-its to come to a bigger idea using the jottings of a student used in Session XIV of *Following Characters into Meaning*. He wrote:

- Rob's dad tells him he shouldn't cry or talk about his mom.
- Rob stood up for Sistine, which showed he isn't totally wimpy.
- Rob likes to whittle and make figurines.
- Rob tells Sistine his mother is dead after she shares her secrets with him.

As you look at these Post-its together, first help kids to sort this list further, looking for ideas that go together. Your children will notice that the first Post-it and the fourth seem to be about the same thing, as do the third and the fourth, and so on. You then can coach your students to think about what these combined ideas are showing us about Rob and Sistine and their relationship and struggles. They may say something like, “This is showing me that Rob’s connection to Sistine will help him find a way to talk about his mom.” And then when pushed to connect more and more of these isolated ideas together, your students might realize that both the whittling and telling Sistine about his mom are examples of Rob opening up to someone else. Your students can write, “Now I am thinking Rob will be able to talk to her about his mom, instead of just thinking about her when he whittles.”

At first glance, this idea may seem more like a prediction than a theory—and you’d be right to call it that. This doesn’t mean it isn’t worthwhile, though, nor the start of something big. In fact, with a little rewording, this child might easily turn this prediction into a theory about these two characters: by helping Rob open up about his sadness over his mother’s death, Sistine helps Rob begin to heal. This, in turn, might become a more universal idea about the role of friends in helping each other through difficult times. That is, this child is well on her way to doing rich character theory work.

This work will help students to prepare to hold onto their good and complex thinking about their characters and begin to name what they think these characters are really all about. Push students to understand that ideas cease to live on just one page, or in one scene, and instead spread through a book. So while we might be content in Part Two for a student to first say, “Rob is wimpy” and then push themselves to develop their thinking about that one scene and say instead, “Rob acts wimpy but really he is just too scared of everyone to stand up to bullies,” in Part Three we want to push our students to hold that idea as they read and keep adding to it as scenes arise that both confirm this thinking and contradict it. As Session XV outlines, we do this by looking for scenes that go with our theory, and then we stop if we need to revise our thinking or if we simply can add this scene as further evidence of our great theory. For example, when we read on and see that Rob is able to face his fears, our students might rewrite their theory to say instead, “At the beginning of the book, Rob is kind of a wimp, but Rob learns to be braver by admitting his feelings to Sistine, and then he can stand up to the bullies after all.”

Some ways to support your students in this work is to have them consider some central questions: What does this character want? What are some of the obstacles that have been getting in the way? How does this character respond to those obstacles? And what resources does the character draw upon, from deep inside, to meet the challenges and reach the goals? (Session XVI of *Following Characters into Meaning* talks about these questions at greater length.) The beauty of these questions is that they apply to all stories because, after all, stories are built on a problem/resolution structure. *All* characters long for something. *All* characters face obstacles. *All* characters respond in some way. And *all* characters rely on something in themselves when they face their challenges. Understanding this narrative structure and learning to look

at characters through this lens will set children on the path to getting at the heart of *any* character they encounter, in *any* book. And asking these questions leads any of us to rich understandings not only of characters, but of a book's messages, of life-lessons.

As children begin to move from inferences about characters to theories about characters, they may stop short at times, pronouncing a single idea *the* idea. They may, for example, stall out on "Rob is a wimp," and declare their interpretive work done. You'll want to teach them ways to keep themselves going, producing more thinking, more ideas, more writing. One easy way to get kids to elaborate is to set them up with conversational prompts they can use as they talk in partnerships. We can go back to the prompts we have been using with children during partner work and during our writing about reading work, perhaps adding a few more here and there to keep the list fresh:

- Perhaps it's because. . . .
- Or maybe it's. . . .
- Another thing it could be. . . .
- This connects to earlier when. . . .
- That reminds me of. . . .
- A stronger word to describe that is. . . .
- This seems significant because. . . .

There are additional prompts in the chart "Conversation Prompts to Keep Partner Talk Going" from *Following Characters into Meaning*. You'll of course have your own ideas for prompts or other ways to get children to grow their thinking even bigger—and children will have ideas, too! Bring them in on the decision making so that they feel ownership in this big, important work. Always, we want to encourage independence in a workshop, and there's no better way than to issue an invitation to children to author their own reading or writing work.

At this point in the unit, your students will most likely have focused on the inferences they have made about their characters, using prompts, partners, and strategies to help them to make those inferences both more complex and more interpretive. In many ways, they are interpreting now—holding onto one big idea about their character and seeking out both corroborating evidence as well as contradictions that they must address. However, at this point in the unit, they are most likely doing this work on their character's traits (albeit in sophisticated and beautiful ways) and perhaps how they see their character changing in the books they are reading. You can push

your students further by having them focus on not just new ideas that they have about their characters, but by looking at what lessons the character is learning in this story. By asking themselves, “What does Rob learn about friendship in *Tiger Rising*?” or “How does Rob learn to deal with loss?” students can, by standing on their strong inferences, begin thinking about big lessons the author might want you to learn. In this, they will be very close to studying themes.

For example, you can demonstrate how by looking at the very same Post-its as earlier in the unit—

- Rob’s dad tells him he shouldn’t cry or talk about his mom.
- Rob stood up for Sistine, which showed he isn’t totally wimpy.
- Rob likes to whittle and make figurines.
- Rob tells Sistine his mother is dead after she shares her secrets with him.

—with the lens now of “what lessons does the character learn about these people, problems, or ideas,” we may begin to generate even bigger thoughts about our books. We might say, for instance, “Rob learns that friendship can help you to deal with your problems,” or “Rob learns that holding in pain is worse than letting it out,” or even “Rob learns that stuffing your feelings makes you feel wimpy.” Sometimes it helps to first name the problems that a character faces in a book and then to ask ourselves, “What lessons does the character learn about \_\_\_\_\_ (the problem).” Of course, as students begin this harder thematic work, they may go back to simpler ideas, such as “Rob learns that friends help you.” While for some students this may be an appropriately challenging goal, for others we will want to continue to provide scaffolding through the prompts and partnerships that have helped them to think in bigger, better, more complex ways from the beginning of the unit.

Even your strugglers will be energized by this work. There’s nothing like making new connections, producing more and more thinking, and growing that thinking into something yet more significant to motivate us to do our very best. You may find that while some kids do extraordinary work in partnerships, others are more inclined to come up with their best thinking on their own. These kids may benefit from writing entries in their notebooks that help them synthesize their ideas and land on new ones. Encourage children to keep generating ideas, whether it’s on their own, in partnerships, in school, or at home. As in the Common Core State Standards, speaking and listening students are supposed to come together with various portions of the text and evidence to support a particular position.

As you near the end of this part, you’ll want to teach children that as they read on, they are bound to see that repeated actions and objects—the elements that weave in and out of the fabric of the book—often turn out to be symbolic. They are what the

author wants us to pay attention to. These recurring parts tell us something meaningful about the characters and about the story, too. You may want your students to keep track of the recurring things they see in their own books. Or as a class, you can track the parts that weave throughout the read-aloud book. Then children can work in partnerships (perhaps two partnerships can pair up), noticing what these threads tell us about the book and about the characters, too. The author might have threaded any number of things throughout her story, so why this one? Why that one? What is significant, for example, about the recurring image of a closed suitcase in *The Tiger Rising*? How about a locked cage? Rob's rash? What do these three recurring threads, taken together, help us learn about Rob and about Kate DiCamillo's intended messages for her readers?

### Part Three: Reading across Books and Characters: Seeing Similarities and Differences and Growing Bigger Theories

---

During this final part, you'll invite children to recall all that they've learned so far in the unit and to use that knowledge to think not about *one* book and *one* character but about *several* books and *several* characters. The Common Core State Standards emphasize the need for fourth and fifth graders to compare and contrast characters, settings, events, or themes across several stories, so this addition to the character unit of study is an important one.

You may want to introduce the work of this part by reminding children of all the work they've been doing up until now. "You've become such character experts," you might say. "Earlier in the unit, you described Sistine as 'mean' or 'rude,' and now I hear you saying things like, 'Sistine is like a turtle—hard on the outside and soft on the inside.' You've learned to speak in precise ways, to think about what a character's motivations, traits, words, longings, and actions tell us about that person, to imagine how a character might behave (what he or she might do) going forward. You've also learned to reflect on who a character is by looking backward a bit—noticing patterns of behavior and times when the character struggled, changed, and grew. And now, guess what? You're going to use all that knowledge you've gained to think *across* characters!" It won't be hard to create a drumroll around this part because the work children are about to do is exciting. Chances are, many of your students have already begun to think across texts and characters, noticing, for example, that both Sistine and Gilly have tough exteriors not because they are nasty little girls but because they are trying to protect themselves after having been hurt deeply. Or that both Willie May and Gloria Dump play similar roles as unlikely, but incredibly wise, advisers.

To set up your readers to do this work, it will probably be easiest if students focus on books they've read recently (either through independent reading or during read-aloud), though it's likely that they will spot likenesses between a character they've come to know intimately this year and one they remember fondly from a book they read last summer, or from a favorite book a parent read to them years ago. So long as

you have a way to put those books into your students' hands, that's fine! In fact, especially when they are first starting this work, you may want to encourage kids to look not only at the novels they've been reading, but at easier picture books too. Often simple books carry big messages, but they are generally easier to spot because they are conveyed across fewer pages, sometimes in more obvious ways. It won't take long for youngsters to decide that Jeremy in *Those Shoes* may long for a special pair of designer shoes, but what he really wants is to fit in, to be like everyone else. Or maybe it's that he simply doesn't want to be the kid who can't afford "those shoes." Having these theories in mind as they now turn to chapter books like *Becoming Naomi Leon* (Pam Muñoz Ryan) or *Notes from a Liar and Her Dog* (Gennifer Choldenko) will pave the way to thinking about other characters who struggle with issues of identity and not fitting in, poverty, and longing—for something they cannot have or to be someone they are not.

A word of caution: it is important that young people make thoughtful decisions about which books to look across rather than just looking at any books. While it's true that sophisticated readers can draw comparisons between any number of books and that many authors address the same or similar issues and themes, you'll want to steer your kids, at least in this early stage of cross-book character work, to notice the obvious ways in which characters can be contrasted. Perhaps two characters are each seeking acceptance but go about this in different ways. Or maybe two characters have each lost a parent and are having a hard time letting people in. Books that share like characters (and like settings, events, and themes) are good choices to steer children toward. Often authors will address similar themes and include similar characters—or characters who are facing the same or similar issues—in more than one book. Opal in *Because of Winn-Dixie* and Rob in *The Tiger Rising*, two terrific chapter books by Kate DiCamillo, share many experiences, encounters, and people in their lives. Both are struggling with the loss of a parent and the need to let people in, but each goes about this in different ways.

You may find it helpful to group like books together at first, steering children to think across those texts. Eventually, you'll want to remove that scaffolding because the hope is that children will be able to notice when two or more characters (and settings, events, themes) merit this sort of comparison work. For now, books you pair might include read-aloud books the class has read together, familiar (or new) picture books, and books your kids have read on their own this year. Then, too, if you have multiple books by one author, chances are those will "go together."

As you help students to think across books, you might teach that just as fairy tales often feature archetypes (the hero, the villain, the nasty stepsister), novels also include character types. Of course, children will have learned earlier in the unit that characters are complicated—they aren't all one way, and often they surprise us. Nonetheless, even the most complex character often falls into a character type. Our old friends Rob and Opal may have flaws, but they are nonetheless heroes, as the main characters of the books in which they appear. As such, there are things we can expect will happen to these two: they will go on journeys of some sort, will be tested,



will make mistakes, and will suffer. And then, just when things seem most awful, they will find a way out, they will conquer whatever demons they are facing (or at least find ways to begin to face those demons), and will learn something valuable that helps them to not only “save the day” but also live more fulfilled lives. Both *The Tiger Rising* and *Because of Winn-Dixie* also feature “villains” or people who create struggles for the main characters (Beauchamp, the Threemonger boys, Opal’s mother, the Dewey boys) and “fairy godmothers” or wise advisers (Gloria Dump, Miss Frannie, Willie May). Having children think about characters as types (or archetypes) is one way to get them thinking about similarities and differences across books.

You might also teach students that readers compare characters who face similar issues or struggles. We think about what makes these character struggle with a particular issue or long for something, and we think about what traits contribute to this struggle/longing. We ask ourselves, “How do these characters handle this struggle/longing? How do they go about resolving the situation? What can we learn from each one?” Sometimes two characters are faced with strikingly similar problems—both Opal and Rob have lost their mothers—but they respond to the problem in entirely different ways. Rob retreats into himself and tries to shove down his feelings, whereas Opal talks openly about missing her mother and poses questions to help understand why her mother left. Eventually, the two find ways to grow closer to their fathers and to other people, too, which initiates healing for both. Children can think not only about these two characters (or any characters they are comparing) but also about themselves. Have they faced similar losses/wants/struggles? How did they deal with those? What traits do they have that may have influenced their responses? Are they more similar to Rob? To Opal?

As students work to develop these connections between characters, many will find that conversations with partners will help to grow their understanding in many ways. Ideally, they will have read some of the same books so that they can talk across books without having to explain too much to each other. You might also see, though, that especially with your more advanced readers, rich insights come from comparing ideas about a character a child knows well with a character that child doesn’t know, but whose partner knows well. Then, too, it may be that at first two characters seem nothing alike—perhaps their situations are entirely different—but once children begin to dig a bit deeper, they discover that despite these differences, the two characters are alike in important ways. They may both long to be someone else or be faced with a similar handicap or struggle to make friends. Even if children don’t find easy similarities between characters, they may find that the themes of two books overlap or that the differences between two characters allow for a meaningful conversation.

Children can push each other to think beyond the surface by relying in part on prompts. Some we find helpful are:

- “What does your character really want?”
- “What is your character’s biggest struggle?”

- “Why do you think that? Can you say more?”
- “Is there something in the text that makes you think that?”
- “I think our/these two characters might be similar because. . . .”
- “I think our/these two characters might be different because. . . .”
- “Have you found the same thing with the character in your story?”

As you head toward the end of this part and unit, you may find that what began as a focus on character has returned to building theories—this time with a universal spin. Children will have had some practice growing theories during Part Two, and now is a perfect time for them to push themselves to grow even bigger, more universal theories, by looking across characters and across texts. For example, the child who earlier landed on the idea that “Gilly hurts others so they don’t get close to her and don’t matter to her, and so that they, like her mother, don’t hurt her” might, after drawing comparisons between Gilly (*The Great Gilly Hopkins*), Opal (*Because of Winn-Dixie*), and Rob (*The Tiger Rising*), grow the theory that “When children lose a mother, they struggle in significant ways. Some kids create a protective hard shell to keep people out, some have a hard time letting the past go, and others struggle to let their feelings out and people in.” Gilly, Opal, and Rob each respond differently to the hurt of an absent mother, but the pain they feel is universal to the experience of having been hurt by this particular kind of absence. The hope is that children begin to make connections not only across books but also to life.

One way to bring this unit to a close is by asking children to reflect on themselves. They can think back over the unit and review the work they’ve done, asking, “Who am I as a reader? What kind of thinking work do I tend to do?” or “What can I learn about myself by comparing and contrasting my thinking to that of my partner?” That is, you’ll steer children to apply some of the theorizing work they’ve done around characters over the course of this unit to *themselves*. If we want children to carry the work of this unit to other units and other books, and to their lives, too, we’ll want to give them the tools to understand that theorizing about characters does not stop with the end of the unit. Rather, one way they can use what they learned from this unit is they can continually reflect on who they are as readers and thinkers and how that translates to the way they live their lives. Children can share these reflections in a celebration. You might encourage students to show their self-reflections through a self-portrait. Alternatively, you might give kids blank bookmarks and ask them to think about the books they’ve read and loved and ways in which they see themselves in the characters they’ve encountered. They can jot reflections onto their bookmarks and then add to these throughout the year. Just as they come to know a character more precisely and complexly as they gather more information from the pages of their

books, they, too, will come to describe themselves with increasingly meaningful specificity and understanding as they gather life experience.

## Additional Resources

---

This unit is organized into three parts. During the first part of this unit your students will be asked to generate theories about the characters they encounter. By doing this work, readers will develop their skills of synthesis and inference. We recommend that you study your students' work closely to develop an understanding of the pathways of skill development on which they will travel. Then, we recommend you use performance assessment, either those you develop or those provided by the TCRWP, as well as feedback to determine where students lie on that pathway and how to move them along. In the next portion of the unit, you will teach students to grow their theories into big ideas about characters as they develop thinking that is both more precise and more complex. Finally, during the third portion of the unit, you will set students up to think interpretively across texts, considering how two or more authors explore similar themes, each in particular ways. Across this part, your students' fledgling theories will build in complexity. Rather than focusing merely on cross-text character similarities and differences, in this final part students will think about larger perspectives and messages, determining a story's theme and comparing and contrasting the distinct ways in which several authors (or several texts) address like themes. This work is detailed in *Following Characters into Meaning* from the series *Units of Study for Teaching Reading: A Curriculum for the Reading Workshop, Grades 3–5*.

The strongest units are assessment based. Therefore, you will want to look closely at your students' work before and during this unit of study. Study their Post-its, thinking about the skills with which they are secure and the skills that need more attention. If the majority of your students seem to have trouble inferring, then you may want to linger a little longer in some of these lessons. Perhaps you'll plan a series of lessons that will help ratchet up children's inferring skills. Or maybe you'll save some days for teaching repertoire lessons—lessons that explicitly teach kids to use everything you've already taught, all the time referring to charts and other tools in the classroom that help them remember and use all of the strategies you've demonstrated.

The interpretation work inside of this unit is critical. Interpretation is not saying that the character is nice or mean. You will want to study your students' Post-its, and if you see that they are still writing that characters are simplistic and straightforward, you will want to emphasize nuanced theories. You might decide to linger on the first part, taking the second and third bullets and turning them into a string of mini-lessons. You might decide to teach additional strategies to help students grow more complicated theories and then big, complex thoughts. Then too, you might emphasize this work in your read-aloud and teach strategy lessons to small groups of children to help move them toward this sophisticated work.

There are many ways a unit of study on character could go, and you will have choices to make as you plan and teach this unit. Your decisions will be influenced by the students in your classroom, your colleagues, and the materials available to you. We invite you to study your conferring notes, students' reading logs, students' work, and other sources of data to make wise decisions about your plans for the unit. The teaching points below describe one version of this unit of study.

## Teaching Points for Parts One and Two from *Following Characters into Meaning*, Volume Two (Parts Two and Three)

---

### Part One: Building Theories, Gathering Evidence

- "Today I want to teach you that we may pull in to read, but we also pull back from reading to think. We read like we are a character in the book, but we also read like we are a professor, growing intellectual ideas about the book. We read like we're under the covers, reading by flashlight, but we also turn the imaginary lights on in the room and scrutinize the text to grow ideas. The most fervent ideas center on the people in our books."
- "Researchers have found that some people are good at reading people, and those who can read people in real life can also read people in stories. Today I want to teach you that to read people—in life and in stories—it is important to remember that actions can be windows to the person. In life and as we read, we can pause after a character has done something and say, 'Let me use what just happened as a window to help me understand this person.'"
- "Today I want to teach you that it is important to keep in mind that characters are complicated; they are not just one way. And here's a key point: To grow nuanced and complex ideas about characters it helps to think deeply about times when a person seems to act out of character."
- "Today I want to teach you that paying attention to the objects that a character keeps near and dear is one way to grow ideas about what kind of person that character is. Those objects are often windows into the mind and heart of our characters. The possessions that a character keeps close almost always reveal something important about the person."
- "Today I want to teach you that when readers want to think deeply about a character, we examine the ways that people around the character treat the character, looking especially for patterns of behavior. We not only notice how other people, other characters, treat and view the main character, we also notice what

others call the character and the voice and body language people assume when talking to the character.”

- “Today I want to teach you that readers sharpen our ideas about characters by using precise language to describe them and their actions.”

## **Part Two: From Inference toward Interpretation**

- “Today I want to remind you that when readers get about halfway through our books (or when our books are bursting with ideas), it is wise to take some time to organize our thoughts. One way to do this is to sort our Post-it notes into piles of ideas that seem to go together.”
- “Today I want to remind you that once readers have grown a theory, a big idea, we reread and read on with that theory in hand. And I want you to know that we hold a theory loosely, knowing it will have a life of its own as we travel on. It will take up places we didn’t expect to go.”
- “Today I want to tell you that expert readers believe that when thinking about stories, it can especially pay off to pay attention to characters in general and to their motivations and struggles in particular.”
- “Today I want to teach you that a simple, obvious idea about a character or a book is a great place to start, even if your goal is a complex idea. To take that simple idea as a starting place and to climb to higher levels of thinking, it helps to use a few phrases as thought prompts, grasping those phrases like we grasp rungs on a ladder, using them to help us climb higher and higher.”
- “Today I want to teach you that the stuff that keeps recurring, that resurfaces often, that is threaded in and out of the fabric of a narrative, is the biggest stuff. That’s true in life and true in books. In books, the things that the author mentions again and again are the ones that she really wants you to notice, the ones that are critical to understanding the essence of the character and the story.”
- “Today I want to teach you that we can look back on the jotted notes we make as we read and research our thinking, asking, ‘What sort of thinking do I tend to do as I read?’ After we spy on our own thinking, we can put together all the clues that we see, and together, these can help us construct a sense of ourselves as readers. We can come away from this saying, ‘I’m the sort of reader who does a lot of this kind of thinking and who doesn’t do a lot of that kind of thinking.’ We can then give ourselves goals so we deliberately outgrow our current habits as readers and thinkers.”

### **Part Three: Reading across Books and Characters: Seeing Similarities and Differences and Growing Bigger Theories**

- “Readers, so far, you’ve been studying a character and finding precise words to describe this character. You’ve been studying what this character wants, the challenges this character faces, how this character grows or changes. Today I want to teach you that readers can place several characters—even ones that appear in altogether different books—alongside each other to compare them. Just as we compare people in real life, we can think, ‘How are these characters like each other? What about their situation is the same? Is there something common in their way of solving their lives’ issues?’”
- “Today I want to teach you that one way to compare characters is to look at whether the challenges or situations in their lives bear any similarity to each other. ‘Have both these characters lost a parent? Are both friendless? Are both struggling to help a grown-up? Are both suffering from being moved away or displaced from a home and town they loved?’ It may appear that characters are different based on their age, gender, race, class, setting, or personality, but when readers look at the life situations that two characters have to deal with, we can uncover surprising similarities.”
- “Today I want to teach you another way to compare characters is to look across books to find characters playing parallel roles in these books. For example, when we compare two main characters, two moms, two best friends, two grandfathers, two villains, even two pets, we sometimes uncover parallel threads that we may not have noticed before.”
- “One of the best ways to grow ideas is through conversation. Today I want to remind you that when we describe all that we’re noticing and thinking about a character to a partner, our thinking grows. Partners help each other notice new patterns or suggest details that we may have overlooked, allowing for a far richer compare-and-contrast.”
- “Today I want to remind you that partners can push each other to think beyond the surface by asking questions. Some great questions to push a partner’s thinking about a character include:
  - ▮ What does your character really want?
  - ▮ What is your character’s biggest struggle?
  - ▮ Why do you think that? Can you say more?
  - ▮ Is there something in the text that makes you think that?
  - ▮ I think our/these two characters might be similar because. . . .



- ▶ I think our/these two characters might be different because. . . .
- ▶ Have you found the same thing with the character in your story?"
- "Today I want to teach you that readers don't just compare characters with each other. We often compare a character with ourselves. When we look at the struggles and dreams that our characters have, we think of ways in which we are similar to these characters. There are particular characters that a reader begins to identify with and learn life-lessons from."



## UNIT THREE

# Nonfiction Reading

*Using Text Structures to Comprehend Expository,  
Narrative, and Hybrid Nonfiction*

**NOVEMBER**

**(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: T)**

Before you launch into this unit, you'll want to make some decisions, and to do this, you need to think about the nonfiction texts you have available and your plan for supporting nonfiction reading across the year. Presumably, you'll be teaching nonfiction reading as part of your content-area instruction in social studies and science, and if you follow this calendar, then you'll also devote almost half a month of your reading workshop to nonfiction reading as demanded by the Common Core State Standards. That's a lot of nonfiction reading!

In this write-up, we outline a unit of study in which you give your students stretches of time to read whole texts, reading not to answer a specific question or to mine for an interesting fact or to follow just the features of the text but rather to learn all that the author wants to teach. This write-up is aligned to *Navigating Nonfiction*, a recently published two-volume unit of study within *Units of Study for Teaching Reading: A Curriculum for the Reading Workshop, Grades 3–5* (Tolan and Calkins). The unit spotlights the skills of determining importance, finding the main ideas and supportive details, summary, synthesis, and reading to learn. The following nonfiction unit focuses on teaching students to increase their expertise through interpretation, cross-text comparisons, synthesis, research, and nonfiction projects. According to Webb's Depth of Knowledge, these are level four strategies and skills.

For students to ascertain the big ideas in a nonfiction text in such a way that they can summarize as well as think critically about them, they need to grasp the text's infrastructure of ideas and supporting details. We envision that your students will be writing essays during writing workshop on topics of their own choice while they

engage in this nonfiction reading work, and so they will be able to recognize, in the expository texts they read, a template that they'll have come to think of as boxes-and-bullets. If readers expect an infrastructure of big ideas and supportive information within expository texts and if they learn to use text features, white space, and cuing systems such as transitional phrases to discern that infrastructure, then they will be able to glean what matters most, even in texts that contain an overwhelming amount of raw information. Of course, the infrastructure will be different when students read narrative nonfiction—and it is important students know this and use that knowledge to help them approach the latter texts differently. In this unit, you'll teach students to become expert at explicit and implicit structures of texts.

This unit highlights the importance of structures and channels students to read texts of a particular structure for a bit, noting that structure. You'll need to decide whether to start by channeling students toward expository or toward narrative nonfiction, what the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) calls literary nonfiction. For a number of reasons, we encourage you to start by spotlighting expository nonfiction, which the NAEP highlights as a major part of informational nonfiction. Not only will this feel fresher to your students but there also tend to be more accessible texts available in this structure. Then, too, beginning with expository nonfiction will put you in a position to recruit involvement from readers who have decided that fiction reading isn't their cup of tea. Finally, beginning in this way allows you to hug the shores of *Navigating Nonfiction*, leaning on that book for minilesson and small-group ideas. If you decide to start with an emphasis on expository texts, you can convey to your class that this unit will invite readers into a whole new kind of reading—and that some readers will like it even better than they did fiction. Once you have provided almost two weeks of instruction in expository text structures, you'll introduce narrative nonfiction, again alerting students to the ways in which expository and narrative texts differ in structure and to the fact that each requires a different alertness from the reader. Though the narrative structure of most biographies and true adventures will feel familiar to young readers who have a strong grasp of story grammar, other narrative nonfiction texts might provide a challenge, especially if the main "character" is a plant or an animal and if technical, content-specific vocabulary blurs comprehension. You'll want to alert readers to decoding strategies as well as teach them to recognize unlikely, inanimate protagonists within their narratives so that they counter these comprehension hurdles.

To support the work of this unit, you'll want to evaluate your classroom library and consider how to expand it. If you bring forward just your expository nonfiction texts, do you have enough texts to keep your students "in books" for the period of time in which you'll highlight expository nonfiction? As you mull over this question, keep in mind that many nonfiction books are deceptive. Their lush photographs can mask the difficulty level of a book. Also keep in mind that a fair percentage of your readers may need to read expository texts that are a notch easier than the fiction books they generally read. If this is a new genre to them, they may need a bit of warm-up time before they can read expository books that are as hard as the fiction that they read. If possible,

you will want to gather multiple texts on a few subjects, so that students have access to more than one book about a topic. On the TCRWP website, we've included a leveled bibliography of nonfiction texts, which includes a large section for texts that are expository. This collection is angled to include books that have lots of text, which are designed to support kids' volume of reading, as well as books with a clear exoskeleton, often of headings and subheadings. The books on that list are all available from Booksource. Please contact us with more suggestions of books you use to keep up your students' stamina and skill level. Our lists are always changing and are collaboratively written.

You'll also want to decide which text or texts you'll highlight in your read-aloud and minilessons. In Volume One of *Navigating Nonfiction*, Kathleen Tolan and Lucy Calkins model on a collection of texts, including *Bugwise* and *Frogs and Toads*. You can find a list of recommended texts for read-aloud for this unit on our website and on the DVD that accompanies the *Units of Study*. In general, we recommend choosing texts that are lively, accessible, and that include many of the text features and reading challenges that your students will face in the expository and narrative texts they'll be reading in the unit. That is, choose a few texts in which the ideas and categories of information are explicit and others in which the reader needs to read between the lines to infer the message of the author. The first part of this unit focuses on expository texts, and the second on narrative and hybrid, so you'll want to choose one or two short texts for each of these structures.

A word of advice: especially if you do not have enough just-right texts for students to maintain their volume of reading during this unit, we strongly suggest that you reserve time every day (at least fifteen to twenty minutes in school and more time at home) for students to continue reading just-right chapter books and novels in fiction, using and practicing all the skills you've already taught. And in any case, be sure readers continue to maintain their outside-school reading and their reading logs. Monitor that they're reading the proper number of chapter books each week—probably anywhere from one to four, *in addition to* the informational nonfiction texts they read. The Common Core State Standards emphasize the significance of students reading informational texts and literature—and usually, students can keep going with both across these two months, to keep up their stamina and skill level. Of course, if your students are doing a lot of informational reading in science and social studies, that helps as well—or if they have related novel book clubs in those classes, that can also help. Students become powerful readers when teachers plan across the curriculum—which is a necessity if we want our students to achieve at the high levels demanded by the Common Core State Standards, and according to our own dreams and aspirations for them.

For the very start of your unit, you may want to locate the expository texts that have a fairly clear infrastructure of headings and subheadings, and even get two copies of some of these texts so that readers can start by reading at least one book in same-text partnerships. Creating same-text partnerships early on in the unit can provide effective scaffolds for readers. Soon students will be able to read these texts

independently, and they will be able to work with texts that expect that it will be the reader, not the writer, who almost “writes” the subheading, chunking the text as he or she reads it. As you examine books, determining which are worth having multiple copies of in your library, look for ones that:

- Have a clear organizational infrastructure
- Are at difficulty levels where students can read with fluency, comprehension, and accuracy
- Are highly engaging texts

## Part One: Determining Importance and Synthesizing in Expository Nonfiction

---

To start this work, you will teach text-previewing strategies, what Norman Webb’s Depth of Knowledge levels describe as a level three skill. You’ll let students know that even before actual immersion into the text, readers use headings, subheadings, font differences, and other visual cues to get a “lay of the land,” anticipating how the text might go and what the text might be trying to teach. Your teaching might model that paying attention to expository text features such as the table of contents, diagrams, charts, graphic organizers, photos, and captions helps develop a sense for text content. You might encourage students to also activate their prior knowledge of the topic, orienting themselves to predict the likely subheadings and content-specific vocabulary they’ll encounter reading forward. If the text is about a wild animal you’re discussing, you’d teach students to approach it asking, “I wonder if this text will have the usual categories of information: ecosystem, body, eating habits, predators, and so forth.” If the text is about a war, you’d teach students to bring their expectation that they will learn about the two warring sides, the reasons for the war, the series of major battles, the turning points, and so on. That is, even before they begin to read, you want readers to be alert to the visual features of expository texts as well as to anticipate particular content.

This work of previewing a text so we can read with power is described in Session I, Volume One of *Navigating Nonfiction*. The session lays out the important work readers can do to “rev up” their minds for reading. Too often, you’ll see students pick up non-fiction books and just flip through them with little apparent focus, or even read only the backs of books! That’s browsing, not readying to read. It’s what we do in a supermarket line—it’s not what we do when we study a subject seriously. Malcolm Gladwell, in *Outliers*, reminds us that one of our jobs is to teach students to work hard—that is the key to extraordinary success. So here, you’ll begin by showing students how to approach a text in a serious, intellectual manner.

You will follow this initial instruction on previewing texts by telling students that actual reading of a text means constantly confirming, revising, or adding to one's initial expectations about the text. Rather than letting students dive into texts uninitiated, you'll be teaching engagement from the outset, where they read with a curious stance, checking what they read against what they had *expected* to read. In the shift from previewing to reading, your goal is that readers find their expectations become more focused and specific: "Oh, this is not just about moose in general. It's about the new dangers to their habitat," or "This looked like an all-about-whales text but it actually *compares* whales and dolphins."

In the next lesson, you might teach students how to look for structure within a nonfiction text, particularly teaching them how to "chunk" a text and say back the important information as a summary. Right away, you will want to alert students to the boxes-and-bullets infrastructure of expository texts, which is what enables readers to ascertain the main idea (box) and the supporting details (bullets) of their texts. This awareness is crucial to understanding the interconnectedness of ideas within the text; you want to guard against students picking up a random fact (smaller bullet) from the text without connecting it to the bigger idea (box) that validates it. It is no easy task for readers to determine the main idea of a paragraph or a passage, especially when these are mired in intriguing or overwhelming new facts and details. You will need to constantly remind readers to ask themselves, "What is the one big thing that this text is teaching, and how do all the other details connect with this?"

Once students develop an eye for the architecture and layout of expository texts, it becomes possible to take in, synthesize, learn from, and respond to large swaths of nonfiction texts. That is, once readers recognize a text structure, they can use that information to structure their own reading, allowing parts of the text to take on greater significance while letting other parts of the text fall away. You'll want to teach students that most expository nonfiction has a central idea followed—or surrounded—by supporting evidence. In your teaching, you will probably model reading a mentor text with an eye for that central idea as well as for supportive specifics, demonstrating that expository reading involves gleaning outlines and summaries of the text. The goal is that this awareness becomes foundational to the way your kids approach expository texts. In this way, you'd support reading expository texts in their entirety, enabling students to understand the main *concepts* that the text teaches as opposed to an "extractive" way of reading expository in which readers mine texts for isolated nuggets of trivia or "cool facts" that, to their eye, might bear no connection at all to the larger scheme of a topic.

As students move up levels, the sections of the texts they are reading will often contain more than one idea—a fact that is emphasized in the Common Core State Standards. So in your next lesson, you'll teach students to notice, as they read on, whether the next part of the text holds a new idea, with supporting information, or whether it adds more information about an idea that was already introduced. It's important to emphasize that nonfiction readers read with the same attention to stamina and pace that fiction readers do—they don't linger over one picture for an



hour; rather, they move on to gather as much information as possible, while constantly asking themselves, “How does all of this fit together?”

Sometimes it is helpful for readers to simply look for the “pop-out sentence” as they read, knowing that often one sentence summarizes the content of a paragraph or a passage. Teach students that this topic sentence is often the first or last sentence—but not always! Students could read the first sentence of a paragraph and ask, “What is this saying?” and then read on, sentence by sentence, asking, “How does this fit with what’s been said so far? And this?” To find the main idea, readers need to take the sentences they’ve read and say what they learned in one short statement, not a question. It may help readers initially to make this underlying boxes-and-bullets infrastructure visible by using a pencil to underline or “box” the main ideas and “bullet” the supporting details. You’ll want to teach readers to break dense swaths of expository text into chunks—either with a pencil or with their mental eye—and to tackle these chunks by fishing out and holding on to the main ideas within, rather than being side-tracked by supporting facts and details. At the end of each chunk, readers may profit from saying (or writing on a Post-it), “This part teaches me. . . .”

Readers can move from finding the main idea of a paragraph to figuring out the overarching idea of a multiparagraph text by noticing as they read from one paragraph to another whether the two paragraphs continue to build on one main idea or whether the second paragraph turns a bend, laying out yet another idea. Nonfiction texts can be tricky because section dividers are often invisible; readers need to be vigilant, reading in such a way that they notice when the text has gone through a transition and saying, “Oh, this is about a new subtopic.”

You will want to teach readers to reproduce the same boxes-and-bullets work in reading that they’ve used to structure their essays in the writing workshop (see *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5*). That is, you will ask students to read in such a way that they can take the sort of notes you might take at a well-organized lecture—notes that look like very rough outlines. For a while, they will paraphrase at the end of a chunk of text, pausing to name the gist of what they just read, and to do so in ways that build on what they learned from previous sections. This “reading for gist” builds the muscles foundational to summarizing—a skill that Dick Allington reminds us about in *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers* by saying, “This is, perhaps, the most common and most necessary strategy. It requires that students provide a general recitation of the key content. Literate people summarize texts routinely in their conversations. They summarize weather reports, news articles, stock market information and editorials. In each case, they select certain features and delete, ignore, others” (122).

As students become more skilled at the work of nonfiction reading, you’ll want to remind them to draw on knowledge they bring to the text as well as strategies they have learned in prior units. They’ll want to add what they’re learning now to a growing repertoire, which includes things such as making just-right book choices, paying attention to volume, and using logs to track their reading progress. Readers may want to revisit old charts, making sure that they are applying old strategies to new work.

You'll meanwhile want to encourage them to read broadly, learning as much as they can on any single topic before moving on to a new one.

As your readers become expert on subjects, by reading whole books and then reading yet another book on that subject, they'll need regular opportunities to synthesize their learning by teaching someone else. This expectation creates accountability to the text; readers know they will have to explain the big ideas of the text to someone else, but this makes what could otherwise be a mechanical process into something vitally alive and lots of fun. You're offering a chance for ownership and the opportunity to develop expertise on a nonfiction topic—creating a real incentive for students to master the structure and organization of texts.

Ideally, in the next lesson, you'll teach how to do this work in partnerships. To set readers up to teach in ways that their partner will understand, you'll guide them through some ways to explain what they've learned to their partners. You might have them prepare for partner talk by rehearsing how they'll explain important information by using the text's pictures and charts, an explaining voice, and explaining finger and gestures. You might teach that when partners meet, instead of just saying what they have learned, they:

- Point out the details in the pictures or diagrams that highlight what they're saying.
- Link previous learning to the new information that they just encountered by flipping back and forth to show pictures that build off of one another and by explaining how these go together.
- Add gestures to their explanations and use their voices to emphasize what's important.
- Act out what they learned and invite their partner to join in. For example, if one partner is explaining to his partner that owls don't flap their wings like most birds, but rather they glide, he could have his partner put out his arms and flap them like wings. Then, he could instruct his partner to sway his body and keep his arms out and still to illustrate the difference between gliding and flapping. There's good research to show that adding kinesthetics to our reading process helps move information from short-term to long-term memory—so don't underestimate the value as well as the engagement of using your hands to demonstrate what you've learned.

Once your readers are adept at learning from expository texts and at teaching others the information and significant ideas of those texts, a natural next step to paraphrasing and synthesizing text is to respond personally and intellectually to what the text teaches. You can expect young readers to have ready comments for all the new

information contained in expository texts: “That’s weird,” “That’s cool,” “That’s interesting,” or “That’s gross.” Of course, these are just launching points—quick reactions kids might have to these sorts of texts. You’ll want them to take such responses further intellectually, so that they also think and talk about the texts and generate their own claims about what the Common Core State Standards describe as the implications of what they read.

One way that you could encourage independent thinking off the text is to set up partnerships to have conversations around the books they read. Positioning a reader to locate a big idea in the text so that he or she may then talk back to that big idea in the audience of a partner enables collaborative response to texts. A word of advice: take care to ensure that these conversations are actually *responses to* and *not reiterations of* textual content. To this end, it will make the world of difference to introduce conversational thought prompts that might help students phrase responses to the text. For example, the thought prompts, “But I wonder . . .” and “I used to think that . . . but now I am realizing . . .” will not only structure and channel a response to the text but are also great scaffolds for facilitating talk, allowing students sure and predictable ways to pilot their ideas off the text. You might develop your own conversation prompts for your students to use, ones that facilitate prediction, paraphrasing, or questioning. For a more detailed list of conversation prompts and for guidance on instruction that incorporates these, you might visit Session VII in Volume One of *Navigating Nonfiction*.

Students will naturally question the information they are reading in expository texts. “Why do male emperor penguins stay alone, keeping the egg warm on its feet for two months, with nothing to eat, while the female leaves to fish in the ocean?” a reader might ask. You’ll want to teach your readers to not only read on, seeking answers, but also to think back over everything they’ve read so far and everything they already know. In response to his own question, the reader might offer as answer, “Maybe the male emperor penguin keeps the egg warm instead of the mother because on page 12 it says he has that big flap of fat that she doesn’t have,” or “Maybe the emperor penguin is like the sea horse, and the males are the ones who are responsible for the babies until they are born.” Again, such an inquiry and research stance toward their expository texts has greater urgency and meaning for readers when undertaken collaboratively with a partner rather than in solitude by a lone reader—readers need to read for implication and for the possibility, in their lives, of applying what they know. The Common Core State Standards highlight this as the relevance and significance of what students read.

Finally, you may find it useful to teach a lesson or two designed to help readers tackle challenging words, what the Common Core State Standards call “domain language.” Much of this instruction will merely reiterate decoding strategies of the past such as “substitute the hard word with a synonym and then read on” or “break up the word into its root, prefix, and/or suffix to see.” In many expository texts, however, after an author uses a technical or content-specific word a casual reader isn’t likely to know, he or she provides clues about the meaning of the word, occasionally even

defining the word outright and explicitly within the text or in a marginal glossary feature. Consider the following lines from *The Yangtze River* by Nathan Olson; they are typical of how many expository texts tend to go:

*The Yangtze flows north and then east into a series of **gorges**. **Gorges** are deep valleys with steep, rocky sides.*

Even when the text makes overt efforts, such as the above, to give readers direct accessibility to unfamiliar vocabulary, young readers will often resist adopting the new words they see in print. Technical vocabulary, with its infrequent real-world usage, unconventional spellings, and vague pronunciation, is not the most easy or natural for students to incorporate into their own language. You'll need to urge readers to actively adopt the technical jargon of whatever subject they're reading about, but you will also want to create a classroom environment that encourages this—asking readers to think of themselves as teachers and topic experts and creating space for partnership conversations around these topics, so that students may have the chance to verbally use new content-specific words in a real context.

Students will also profit from learning how to use text features to make sense of unfamiliar vocabulary—illustrations, photographs, and diagrams often accompany the text's effort to define and explain new words or concepts. For example, an illustration that accompanies text that introduces "baleen whales" to a reader will likely have a visual representation of what baleen look like. Some readers need explicit instruction to learn to "read" illustrative portions of the text carefully (e.g., photographs, quotes, timelines, charts, and maps). Teach them to peer closely at the visual features of the text for more clues and explanations of the difficult words or concepts that the text introduces them to.

## Part Two: Navigating Narrative and Hybrid Nonfiction Texts

---

In this second part of the unit, you will teach students to now read *narrative* nonfiction with attentiveness to structure, using story grammar to synthesize and determine importance across large stretches of text. Like expository texts, narrative nonfiction is shaped according to a template. This one is familiar and easier for many students to identify and grasp, since their knowledge of story grammar is well developed by now. Once students recognize that most narrative nonfiction focuses on the goals and struggles of a central character, that the text conveys an underlying idea, and that many nonfiction narratives culminate in an achievement or a disaster, they will be able to make sense and meaning of such texts, following the events and details on the pages and holding onto the information in such a way that it is memorable.

You'll recall that one of the important lessons you taught readers during the expository portion of this unit was to draw on all that they know about a topic to

anticipate how a text might unfold. If a reader is reading an expository text about a moose, the reader can think, “I’ve read other books on wild animals,” and can draw on that prior experience with texts about similar topics to anticipate that this text will contain sections on the animal’s body and how that body is adapted to the ecosystem and allows the animal to handle enemies, and so forth. In this portion of the unit, you’ll want to remind readers to draw on what they know when reading narrative nonfiction, too. If, for example, they are reading the story of a famous dog, like Balto, they’ll access their prior knowledge about dogs and possibly even about sled dogs or Alaska. But they’ll also access what they know about reading narratives—that is, they’ll expect a story structure. Of course, you’ll need to teach your students to read for more than character development and plot in narrative nonfiction—they’ll also read for information and ideas. In this part, then, you’ll teach students to access their narrative expertise, while simultaneously drawing on their new expertise in accumulating and summarizing nonfiction information and ideas. Students must be prepared to read, expecting that a nonfiction book of any sort will teach them something new about the subject.

You may want to begin by giving readers an opportunity to sort books into expository and narrative, so that they practice recognizing the different explicit structures of these kinds of nonfiction texts. Recognizing the structure of a text will help them prepare for how to read it. Be sure that the texts you choose adhere to story structure in ways that will pay off for readers. You will likely have noticed that many—even most—nonfiction texts are hybrids, containing chunks that are expository as well as chunks that are narratives, and eventually you will help students navigate those hybrid texts too, *but for now* your goal is to help readers see ways in which their knowledge of story grammar can help them read nonfiction that is exclusively narrative in nature. This means that to support this work, the books you choose to place before kids ought to be exclusively narrative in structure.

As they familiarize themselves with narrative nonfiction, readers will come to see that a good portion of the texts they read tells the story of people and their achievements. The structure is similar in fiction. Characters have traits and motivations, and as they interact with each other and their environments they come to face challenges or obstacles that the story highlights, which they usually overcome. In narrative nonfiction, the overcoming of obstacles tends to create the story of why a famous person is famous, what he or she achieved, and why these achievements matter. Your students will already know from reading fiction that it is helpful to pay attention to the important events and decisions in a character’s life; they are quick to recognize that a character’s response to those events often reveals his or her traits. Now, teach your readers to develop generalizations about the famous characters or groups of characters they meet in narrative nonfiction, formulating ideas about how certain traits might lead to a character’s ability to overcome difficulty and achieve something meaningful—something so big that it has been recorded in a book. Session IX, Volume Two of *Navigating Nonfiction* demonstrates how to expand the definition of a

main character to apply to the main presence in the book, as in a meerkat colony or the pilgrims.

Next, you will teach your students that narrative nonfiction contains underlying ideas—and that it is the role of the reader to seek those ideas. Your readers are used to activating schema about characters—now you want to activate their schema for realizing that these stories, like all complex narratives, also teach ideas. The story about meerkats probably teaches something about community survival techniques. That story about the pilgrims probably did too! Moreover, the books the students are reading are undoubtedly about more than one idea. Teach them to keep track of ideas, using that same boxes-and-bullets structure, jotting Post-its as they read, talking to a partner, expecting their books to teach them important ideas and information. Having opportunities to teach a partner will be just as important in this part as it was in the first part of the unit.

If you have access to biographies and adventure stories, you may want to begin reading these aloud. Students are likely to find this work more accessible when the books they read take the form of “true stories” that are written engagingly, such as the beautifully illustrated biographies or true adventure stories that line the shelves of so many bookstores. In these, the “hero” or “heroine” is easy to identify, and the “challenge” or “mission” that drives this main character is also clearly spelled out. As students gain confidence, however, you may move to narrative nonfiction texts that are not so easy to classify according to the strict rules of story grammar. These will often be fact-laden—an account of a war or revolution or of a chronological scientific process such as the metamorphosis or life cycle of a particular bird or plant. In the latter, readers won’t always easily identify the main character, who, as a shape-shifting caterpillar or a non-speaking/emoting/moving plant, doesn’t immediately register as animate. You’ll want to show readers alternate ways of determining that a text is indeed narrative in structure and also teach how to hold onto big trajectories in a text rather than simply fact-mining to get “notes.” Session IX in Volume Two of *Navigating Nonfiction* chalks out one direction for this instruction using *Cactus Hotel* as a mentor text, a narrative nonfiction picture book that will feel deceptively like expository to many young readers.

No matter the kind of text students read during this part, the important thing for them to learn is that narrative nonfiction tells a story that teaches both information and ideas. For instance, we can anticipate that a sports biography about a famous basketball player will tell an engaging story about a character who faces interesting challenges, it will teach the reader some of the intricacies of basketball, and it will probably teach the reader why this particular basketball player is famous. It will do all that explicitly. The reader will have to infer what he or she can learn from this famous basketball player; it might be “big idea” lessons such as the importance of determination or the need for people to help each other succeed.

As this part progresses, you’ll want to be sure that students move from retelling to inferring. One way you might help readers with this transition is to model for them how to retell the text by saying, “This text (or this part of a text) is mostly about . . .”



and then to make a more inferential retelling by adding, “And the big new thing it teaches me is. . . .” Alternatively, the reader could say, “And the big way this adds to what I already knew about this subject is. . . .” For instance, the story of Balto tells about a desperate race across Alaska to deliver medicine that could save children’s lives. It also teaches the reader about how sled dogs lead and pull their teams.

Finally, you’ll want to teach students to use what they’ve learned from focusing on expository texts in isolation, and then narrative texts in isolation, to tackle any part of a text that includes narrative and expository sections, such as many of the DK Readers and many of the articles and textbooks that students will encounter in their academic studies in the future. So somewhere near the end of the unit, you’ll show students that some texts are a mixture of non-narrative and narrative structure. These texts present an idea supported by facts and then may tell a story that relates to or illustrates the idea. Some texts like this begin with a story, a letter, a diary entry, or a mini biography and then move into expository text structures. Because texts structured this way often can’t be broken down into boxes-and-bullets, you can teach readers instead to treat them like photographs and quotes, asking, “What is this letter or story teaching me?” and “How does it fit with what I have been learning?” Teach students to synthesize all the information on a page or in a section by determining how all the parts of the text fit together. It is essential then to teach your students to assess a text using what they now know about expository and narrative text structures and then to use appropriate strategies for each part of the text, as well as to synthesize the whole. You can also teach readers to stop at the end of a text they’ve read and to reflect on what they have learned. You can teach them to try to answer these questions: “What do I know now that I didn’t know before reading this book/text?” and/or “How is my thinking different from reading this text?”

## Read-Aloud

---

During the nonfiction unit of study, you will want to read aloud a variety of nonfiction texts, so you can provide students with opportunities to synthesize, have thoughts off the text, make connections, activate prior knowledge, and so on. Your read-aloud should mirror (and act as a prelude to) the reading work you want your students to do. You’ll want to show readers how nonfiction readers assess a text, make plans for how to read it, and begin by chunking it and moving across the sections and pages, including the pictures and diagrams. In the read-aloud, you’ll want to demonstrate how readers learn new words from the context clues and from glossaries and demonstrate word-attack strategies they use as they read nonfiction. You’ll show them how to summarize a text in a boxes-and-bullets format and how to keep adding to those ideas, sorting out when a text has introduced new ideas and when it is giving the reader additional information about a current idea. As you read aloud, you may want to organize a chart that shows how readers synthesize and retell the text as main ideas and supporting information/examples. So if you’re reading a book called *Owls’*

*Nests*, you might teach readers that they could try to infer the main idea of the text, so far, after reading the first page—and that the system they may use to organize these notes is a boxes-and-bullets one that looks like this:

Owls Don't Build Their Own Nests

- They move into abandoned nests.
- They live in holes in the ground.
- They live in holes in trees.

There are several ways to make a read-aloud interactive. You might pause at strategic points in the text to nudge readers into making an inference, predicting what happens next, or articulating a personal response. Such participation from students provides unique and valuable instructional potential as well as the chance to scaffold and manage students' engagement with and response to the texts you read them. However, you will want to keep this participation brief and well-timed so as not to remove from the flow and power of the read-aloud itself. Quick methods such as "Turn and tell your partner . . ." or "Stop and jot" allow efficiency in managing students' responses. To make nonfiction read-alouds interactive, you may also demonstrate acting out the information as you explain the part you just read before giving readers an opportunity to act out a part as *they* explain information to their partner. Having readers stop and sketch what you read, and encouraging them to add details to the sketch as you read on, is another way to do this. The chance to put the information they are hearing into action by adding their own drama will enhance comprehension. This allows students to synthesize the text they're hearing by activating their own experiences and imagination as they create meaning.

Of course, one of the most important elements of a read-aloud is your own voice. Your intonation alone might clarify the structure of expository texts. For example, as you read, you might use your voice to emphasize main ideas, varying your intonation where support details are suggested. Using fingers, you might count out bullets or listed points. While reading aloud narrative nonfiction such as biographies or true stories of animals or people, you will want to teach students to turn on their minds to listen for story structure and pay attention to character. Show them how readers of narrative nonfiction expect the text to teach them something, so they can stop and jot after parts of the story about what the story teaches so far. You will need to model such thinking and inferring explicitly to scaffold and model the kind of work you hope students will ultimately do automatically and without prompting.

When reading nonfiction, readers will encounter specialized vocabulary. This makes it an opportune time to use read-aloud to highlight how readers take on new

vocabulary and incorporate the words into their conversations. You may find it helpful to chart the most important vocabulary from the sections you will be reading aloud that day. You may want to give individuals or partners a word bank of the specialized vocabulary so they can find the words on their own sheets. Then, when students turn and talk, or during whole-class conversation, remind them to use their word banks. This way, they are actively using these words not just that day but across the days that you read aloud that book. If you read aloud many books on the same topic, readers will have repeated opportunities to use and learn these words.

You might also help students understand the information they are learning by giving them a picture or two that you have copied from the book, so they can label these as you read. For example, if you are reading about insects' bodies, and students have a picture of a grasshopper and a beetle in front of them, you can stop to have them add labels like *exoskeleton*, *thorax*, *abdomen*, and *spiracles* as you read about each one. Then, partners can meet and explain to each other what they learned, or during whole-class conversations students can reference their diagrams to explain, compare, and contrast.

## Additional Resources

---

As you approach this unit, your first goal will be to try to avoid the almost universal problem of kids not doing enough reading during the upcoming nonfiction work because of either a shortage of just-right books, an increase in note-taking-type-writing, or terribly slow fluency. Chances are really good that you will not have enough just-right nonfiction to risk having students put aside their fiction books, so first, be sure you keep that independent fiction reading going and that you pay special attention to their logs and other indicators of time spent reading. The next goal will be to scaffold students so they actually *do* the work of determining main ideas. Expect this to be vastly harder for kids than you dreamt, and plan to listen closely, to do lots of quick, decisive small-group teaching and coaching, and to be inventing ways to somehow get your teaching across in ways that allow kids' skills to get better. Watch for students who are belaboring texts—there will be many—and be ready to move many to easier texts and to give text introductions to others. You may want to use readers who know a lot about a topic or who have loved a book to tell newcomers to that topic or that book about it, thereby sharing the workload of scaffolding readers. You'll want to look around the class during reading time and literally count the number of kids who are engaged in reading, and to hold yourself to the goal of supporting sustained and deep engagement. Also watch for kids who didn't get into the idea of reading when fiction was foremost in your teaching and see if you can build new self-concepts around nonfiction reading.

The third-grade nonfiction reading write-up contains lots of specific strategies that can help you lead small-group work for your strugglers. Draw on that write-up for help. These teaching points are from *Navigating Nonfiction in Narrative and Hybrid Text* and represent one possible way that this unit could go.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

---

### Part One: Expository Nonfiction

- “Although great nonfiction readers are very different, one from another, today I want to teach you that every great nonfiction reader reads with energy, with power. One way that nonfiction readers do this is that we rev up our minds for reading. Even before we shift into ‘go’ and read a sentence, a paragraph, of the text, we read the title and subtitles, look over chunks of the text, and we think, ‘I think this book is mostly about . . . and then it will also tell. . . .’”
- “Today I want to teach you that as nonfiction readers learn new ways to make sense of their texts, they hold on to everything they know about good nonfiction reading. They add ‘tools’ for reading nonfiction to their ‘tool belt,’ using these tools as needed when they encounter difficulty.”
- “Today I want to teach you that as we learn new stuff, we need to add the new stuff onto all that we learned earlier, and then draw on everything we’ve learned as we carry on. It’s like the new tools get added to our existing tool kit.”
- “Today I want to teach you that when people read nonfiction books on a topic, we become experts on that topic, teaching others what we know. To teach someone, we need to know the main ideas and the supporting details, and it helps to use an explaining voice and sometimes even to use your face, hands, and whole body to illustrate what you mean.”
- “Today I want to teach you that reading nonfiction is like taking a course in which a person is told a whole lot of new and detailed information. Instead of trying to memorize all that information, it helps to create larger categories to organize that information. That way, as we read, we sort the little bits of information under bigger points, creating a boxes-and-bullets outline that matches the text. It is almost as if, as we read, we write headings for the texts that don’t have any.”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers talk to let texts get through to us, to let texts change our minds. We talk to grow ideas.”
- “Today I want to teach you that whether you are reading nonfiction or fiction texts, it is equally important to talk about those texts with each other, saying, ‘Isn’t it weird how. . .’ and ‘I wonder why. . .’ and ‘Did you notice that. . .’ But I want to add one more thing. Readers read differently because we’re going to be in conversations later. We read holding conversations in our minds.”

## Part Two: Narrative Nonfiction

- “If you divide nonfiction texts into piles based on how those texts are put together, you’ll end up with one pile of true stories (narrative nonfiction) and one pile of all-about texts (little courses on a topic). Today I want to teach you that readers read these kinds of nonfiction texts in very different ways. When readers know what kind of nonfiction book we have, that helps us decide how to read it. When we know we have narrative nonfiction in our hands, we know we can read it like narrative fiction. A story is a story is a story!”
- “Today I want to teach you that you can use what you know about getting to know characters in fiction books to get to know main ideas in narrative nonfiction books. You can often get to some big ideas by stretching the definition of main character to apply to a different sort of main presence in the text. Doesn’t this sound interesting? Soon you’ll be able to try it—to see if you can regard a meerkat colony or a Venus flytrap or a whole group of people, like the pilgrims, say, as the ‘main character’ of your nonfiction narrative.”
- “Today I want to teach you that narrative nonfiction readers keep in mind that narrative nonfiction texts are written to convey not just facts, but ideas. The idea is what allows the storyteller to shape information, experience, into something that fits together so the story is not just a hodgepodge of junky details strung along a line of time. While that is a writer’s goal, it is also a reader’s goal. Readers have to find the unifying idea behind the texts they read to make coherence and find meaning out of what would otherwise be strings of events and facts.”
- “Today I want to teach you that if you find yourself flooded with facts as you read and want to discern what is and is not important, it can help to see that beneath the details, many true stories are either tales of achievement or of disaster, and each of those kinds of story follows a predictable path. That path can help readers determine what matters most in the story—which details to pay most attention to and which to pay less.”
- “Today I want to teach you that the most powerful readers don’t already know what every single word in a book means. The most powerful readers work hard to figure out what a tricky word means! One of the ways we can do that is to get a picture in your mind of what’s going on in that part of the story and to think about what would make sense.”



## UNIT FOUR

# Nonfiction Research Projects

### *Teaching Students to Navigate Complex Nonfiction Text Sets with Critical Analytical Lenses*

**DECEMBER**

**(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: T)**

In this unit, you'll build on all the essential nonfiction comprehension reading skills that you taught in the prior unit, and you'll add new work that teaches students to compare and contrast texts, to analyze their claims and arguments, to investigate authors' points of view, to critique, and to design their own independent analysis of urgent nonfiction research topics that they'll pursue in small research groups. The Common Core State Standards emphasize students' abilities to not only restate the information a text teaches but to analyze the author's claims and the validity of the argument presented, as does Norman Webb's Depth of Knowledge levels. To do that kind of high-level, critical, analytical work, students need to read more than one text on a subject. In effect, they must become expert at gathering information *and* at analyzing how that information is conveyed, so that they can, indeed, evaluate texts rather than simply summarize them. It's exciting intellectual work that you'll embark on with your students—and they'll surprise you with how critical they can be as readers and thinkers, given the opportunity, the expert instruction, and the resources to develop their own stances on important subjects.

It's also important, for their academic and professional success, that students learn to do rapid, on-the-run research and synthesizing, rather than poring for days over the illustrations in a book or the few paragraphs of texts in a short article. The days when students or adults spent weeks or months finding resources, and more weeks or months sifting through the parts of those resources that would most help their research, are over. These days, we need to be able to do research quickly and efficiently. The good news is that all it takes now, to look up the latest genome project or



to find the number of polar animals displaced by the melting of ice caps, is the click of a button; the world is coming to think of the Internet as an eight-billion-page encyclopedia.

Yet even the most cursory research requires certain literacy muscles: the ability to pick the key words to search, the ability to pick one source of information to trust over multiple others, the ability to make up our own mind about aspects of a topic once we've read enough about it. Moreover, these muscles need to be deployed with automaticity. Information changes now almost in the blink of an eye. If a student takes six weeks to research the political system of Egypt, for instance, the information gleaned at the start of the six weeks may no longer be valid by the end of the six weeks! Most of our students, of course, will be researching more stable topics, where they can find lots of information in a few well-chosen books and articles, as well as a couple of websites—but you'll be teaching them, in this unit, to read rapidly, to evaluate and compare resources, and to construct in-depth, critical understandings of research topics that feel urgent.

This unit will take students through two progressive parts. In Part One you'll begin with a research project that you will initiate as a demonstration study and that you will carry through during your read-aloud and whole-class lessons. This study will serve as a scaffold for the students' own studies, which they will embark on in collaborative small groups, just as researchers work and study collaboratively now in almost every field. As you choose the topic and the texts with which you will model, you may decide to choose a complex subject and high-level texts, and your modeling will particularly aim to support the highest level of reading that you think your students can aim for. Or you may choose to model with an accessible subject and text set that you will then hand over to a group of more emergent readers—thus your instruction will launch them each day into their independent work. You'll see that the texts on penguins that are used as a model in *Navigating Nonfiction* are lively and accessible and that they follow this model of supporting your more emergent readers, while your small-group work and conferences will extend your lessons with your highest readers. You can, of course, try to do both, by inserting some high-level texts into your read-aloud text set, and getting to those further into the unit of study or after pre-reading the texts with some of your students.

In Part One, you'll emphasize the power of becoming expert on a subject by reading across texts and comparing information with fellow researchers. You'll emphasize skills that help students acquire and apply technical vocabulary. You'll teach them note-taking strategies and skills that help them write to develop their thinking as they read, gathering information from multiple sources, keeping track of those sources, and developing the essential skills of researchers. These skills are emphasized in the Common Core State Standards.

Then in Part Two, you'll work on enhancing your students' critical analytical skills, showing them how to compare authors' claims, and the validity of their arguments, as well as *how* authors convey information. You'll also teach students to make connections across texts, to draw conclusions, to design their own informed opinions, and to

apply their new-found knowledge by creating instructional material for their peers and communities. Again, these are skills that show up in the Common Core State Standards.

## Preparing for the Unit

---

This unit revolves around thinking and learning derived from reading multiple texts on a single topic—so you'll need to prepare (hopefully with your students) text sets on specific topics, ones for which there are already plenty of available books (either in your room, school library, or neighborhood). Ask students to bring in books and journals from home, trade books with other teachers, visit the library, bookmark trusted websites such as [www.PBS.org](http://www.PBS.org) and [www.Scholastic.com](http://www.Scholastic.com)—and let your students in on the work it takes to assemble texts on a subject. Much of the work of research lies in realizing that information is available all around us, so invite your students to help you sort books and other texts into baskets, and to visit libraries and museum websites. If a few students want to pursue an arcane subject that you don't have resources for, ask if they have any books at home—some of our students are secret collectors of books on WWII planes or thoroughbred horses or castles and knights or pirates or any of the subjects that fascinate young children and the adolescents they become.

As you and your students collect texts for this unit, remember that many of your students should be poised to move up text levels within this unit. This is the second unit on nonfiction reading, so students should have developed proficiency by now. Then, too, they'll be reading a bunch of text on topics of interest. They'll probably read the easier texts first, which will provide them with the domain-specific vocabulary and the conceptual knowledge necessary to comprehend more challenging texts, according to the Common Core State Standards and the new National Assessment of Educational Progress Reading Framework 2011. They'll also be reading alongside other inquirers, and the conversations around shared texts provide the same sort of scaffolding that you provide during guided reading sessions. Then, too, you can take any text-set inquiry group and think of that group as a guided reading group, working with them to be sure they have the requisite skills to read texts of increasing difficulty.

For the shared topic that you'll draw on to demonstrate your lessons and read-alouds, gather two or three short books and an article or two. You may also want to compile a few primary documents to share with students on an overhead projector screen or via document camera or just by opening your laptop. These primary sources are easy to search for online—they might include some photographs or videos, an interview, or images of artifacts or archaeological materials retrieved from a site. Both the Common Core State Standards and the content-area standards suggest that students at this stage should draw on primary sources. As a way to supplement their understanding of a common research topic, students will benefit from collectively studying primary sources that report directly on a topic. Then do your best to build parallel collections with your students on topics they can study in clubs. All of this

work happens before you begin teaching into the research process, so take a couple of days to let students browse the text sets you have available, help them communicate their interests and bring in any resources they find on their own, and perhaps visit a local library, so they can share in the act of gathering texts.

Pay attention to which students you think could work together well, probably keeping groups small, even if you have more than one group share a topic. You'll be talking up the upcoming work, inviting students to share their passions, to give voice to their urgent questions, and ultimately to form research groups that feel as if the students chose these themselves, even if you have been doing some of what Kathleen Tolan calls "behind the scenes engineering." If you're low on the number of texts available for each subject, students might research first one subject and then a second, applying your teaching with increased expertise as they begin their second study.

## **Part One: Synthesizing Complex Information across Diverse Texts and Working in the Company of Fellow Researchers**

---

Before the first lesson, you'll have coached students into work groups that make sense, using what you know of their reading levels, their friendship bonds, their work habits, and their interests and expertise. In your first lesson, then, you'll teach your students that when researchers embark on a learning project, it's helpful to gather and preview a collection of texts, mapping out the lay of the land to plan a learning journey. This is discussed in the integration of knowledge and ideas section of the Common Core State Standards. Invite your students to use their pens as they work, making flowcharts or tables of contents or other visible plans for the order of the texts that they'll read, the categories of information they'll want to tackle, and perhaps some of their burning questions. Remind your readers of the skills you taught in the prior unit, such as previewing a text. Show them how to use the headings and sub-headings, but also show them how to range across more narrative or dense texts, imagining what some of the headings could be. Now is not the time for researchers to simply dive into a single book—it's the time for them to make a plan for their research. Remind them that they know that readers usually begin with a more accessible text—which could be an easier reading level or a text that has more background information. More specific texts, or ones that tackle a narrower subtopic, might be delayed until researchers have constructed some shared knowledge.

This aspect of your teaching—reminding students to use the repertoire of comprehension strategies they already know—is very important in this unit. "Remember earlier when we started reading nonfiction together, we learned that nonfiction readers rev up our minds for reading by previewing the text," you'd say. "We looked at the titles and subtitles, the pictures and charts to make a map in our head of all the smaller parts that make up this topic." You might recruit four or five students to help model this work before the rest of the class. Hand this group some of the books on a topic and ask them to read aloud chapter names from each to note some of the

categories that repeat—and call out some of the more common or overlapping topics, jotting these down as a list on a whiteboard or chart.

Of course, the list your readers generate will be specific to your own whole-class topic. If you've chosen "arctic animals" as a topic, your list might include the tundra, effects of global warming, food chains, and so on. What is important at this starting-out stage is that you teach students to review several books across one topic to independently generate a list of subtopics. Once they have such a list, teach students that we make plans for which topic to read first and which to read next. You might even create a large display (for example, on a chart) where these categories are listed out as headers, asking students to jot a couple of bullets under each heading as they read about it.

In the following lesson, you'll teach your readers to speak as experts and to teach their fellow researchers what they are learning, to compare information and ideas. You might set some time aside each day when students teach what they've read to members of their research group, encouraging them to pick out the bigger boxes and supporting bullets from texts and to "teach" in a boxes-and-bullets format. "Use the illustrations, diagrams, and charts in your books to teach from," you might add, requiring that students open their books to pages containing particularly fascinating or informative illustrations and refer and point to the various features of these as they "teach" their topics to partners.

Teach students also that nonfiction readers have certain habits that make us experts. "A very important one of these," you might tell them, "is to use the special lingo, or technical vocabulary, of this topic." Call their attention to the technical words that are written in bold or italics—and often defined in a sidebar or in the glossary. Explain that "Just like an expert gardener's vocabulary would have words like *compost*, *nitrates*, *dead-heading*, *pruning*, and *perennials* and an expert on skateboarding's vocabulary would probably be full of words like *pivot*, *wheelie*, *slalom*, *kick flip*, and *long board*," they too need to read to pick up the lingo, or technical vocabulary (what the Common Core State Standards call "domain language"), that will make them *sound* like experts on their topic.

Next, teach your readers that researchers don't just *take information in* while reading. We also think about whatever we've read—we wonder at this, we think more deeply about that, we make connections, we ponder, we consider the *implications* of what we read. Then we take some of what we're thinking, jot it down, and write deeper off of it. You'll set up your readers to "write to think," showing them that rewriting something fascinating in their own words (starting a sentence with prompts such as "In other words . . ." or "Stated differently . . ." or "This matters because . . .") can spur bigger ideas if they just keep their pens moving. Other thought prompts such as "This makes me realize . . .," "This is interesting because . . .," "This makes sense because . . .," or "This reminds me of . . ." can all be powerful ways for students to extend a point they've read about. To read about how students might be taught (and supported in their efforts) to respond to their nonfiction reading by "writing to think," refer to Session XVI of *Navigating Nonfiction*.

As your readers move to a second and a third text about a topic, it will become important to bring in cross-text comparisons. You'll want readers to move across texts cumulatively adding to their understanding of a topic: "This book taught me . . . and this book adds to this information by telling me . . ." or "This book introduces the point that . . . and this book provides *more detail* on this by saying. . . ." Teach students that they don't have to start whole new pages of notes for each book, but that instead, they may make charts and diagrams that let them gather evidence for a few important ideas and categories of information. They can teach their fellow researchers about the significance of each new text by highlighting the particular contribution that text makes to their shared knowledge.

You might also nudge readers to move between texts, catching conflicting information: "In this book it says . . . but in this other book it says. . ." Teach that they might read a third book to judge which information they trust more. Students might now also "read" primary sources and contrast these with secondhand accounts on their topics. With some effort, one can find primary texts on the unlikeliest of topics. If the topic is "ancient Egypt," for example one might share tomb inscriptions translated from the original hieroglyphs or the notes or writings of an archaeologist providing an account of how he stumbled upon a previously unknown tomb or what enabled him to identify a certain mummy. You might teach students the difference between a primary and a secondary source of information on a topic, adding that true expertise means not merely reading accounts written by other experts but actually chasing a topic to its first and most basic sources of information.

Many nonfiction texts contain primary documents such as original photographs taken at a site or images showing manuscripts or artifacts related to the topic. Teach students to pay specific attention to these images, identifying why they qualify as primary sources and what one might learn or interpret from studying these closely. This work is aligned with the Common Core State Standards. Teach that to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, readers ask ourselves, "Was the author present at the event being written about?" We also consider whether a nonfiction text relates a personal experience or an eyewitness account (primary source) or whether it reports other texts or other people's experiences (secondary source).

As your researchers develop their expertise in nonfiction subjects, help them develop their expertise as collaborative club members, too. Teach clubs to talk often about their topic, retelling club members the boxes-and-bullets they've read on a particular day, sharing illustrations and charts that reveal more information about a topic, comparing and contrasting illustrations from different texts and also sharing the deeper thoughts they uncover as they "write to think" about their reading. If their text sets contain primary as well as secondary sources, encourage club members to distinguish between and compare these. Remind clubs of the protocols that make for good membership: to listen carefully, to take turns talking, to plan and divide roles. As the Common Core discusses in the informational section, one goal is for students to integrate information from several texts on the same topic to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.



If you want to your students to have a close connection to writing, or to convey their ideas that they are speaking in flash-drafts of opinion pieces, you may push clubs toward planning and mentally drafting opinion pieces dealing with their topic. Writing opinion pieces requires a level of familiarity with a topic—one can't form independent opinions about topics that one has little or no knowledge of. This could be the perfect time, therefore, to harness students' reading and thinking about topics that they are having active discussions about—and pushing them to state (and defend) opinions about these. During their club conversations, teach students that each member might state an opinion as a “thesis statement” or “claim,” for example, “I think Cleopatra was a better ruler than King Tut,” and then supply two or three pieces of evidence for this claim by citing information from the books in the club's text set. Teach other club members to listen carefully to a claim and see if they can add evidence in support of this—or provide evidence that challenges this claim. Though this work will be done orally, this is the essential foundation for opinion (and in the case of a challenge to the claim, argument) writing. You might ask students to “record” the opinion essays they've generated through club conversations by flash-drafting them on papers to place within club folders. In Webb's Depth of Knowledge, this work would be considered a level four.

## Part Two: Critiquing Texts with Analytical Lenses and Sharing Our Research

---

In this part, you'll teach clubs to look more critically at the texts in their text set, asking the questions that experts automatically consider: “What is the author trying to make the reader feel about this topic?” Students will tune themselves to noticing whether a particular text evokes pity, anger, admiration, or some other emotion for a topic. One text might inspire fear at the bloodthirsty nature of gorillas, while another inspires remorse and concern for their endangered status, and a third might actually make us feel sad at the stories of what poachers do to gorillas in the wild. So your first lesson in this part will demonstrate how to ascertain what an author gets us to *feel* about a subject, through the images, stories, and information that author chooses to include. You'll push researchers to identify their emotional response to their subject as they reconsider the texts they've read so far, naming that this one got them to sympathize with polar bears, that this one made them outraged at greenhouse gasses, that this one, on the other hand, made them somewhat afraid of polar bears. This is exactly what the Common Core State Standards means when it says, “Explain how an author uses reasons and evidence to support particular points in a text, identifying which reasons and evidence support which point(s).”

A second part of this lesson, which you can do in the same or in the next session, will help students to note craft moves—*how* the author engineered a certain response from a reader, whether a particular choice of words or particular illustrations contribute to making us feel a certain way. An important lesson to teach students during



this process is that “nonfiction” texts may claim a truth but that they are authored by people who have their own perspectives, angles, motives, and lenses. The idea that all nonfiction texts are simply one author’s perspective on the truth will be news to some students. Since your readers have multiple nonfiction sources on an identical topic to consider, they’ll be better placed to evaluate the different ways that these texts approach, deal with, and present this topic. It’s always easier to evaluate an author’s claims and perspectives when you have another author’s text to lay alongside the first. One text might present Roman gladiators as tough heroes, for example, while another portrays them as poor victims of a cruel social order. One text might present sharks as bloodthirsty killers, while another presents them as intelligent animals that don’t attack nearly as often as people think. One text will present penguins as hapless fodder of polar bears and humans, while another will emphasize their complex social structures. You’ll have to demonstrate this concept multiple times, if your students are new to reading analytically for the author’s point of view rather than as consumers of information. The Common Core State Standards call this analyzing multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent.

Your readers will gradually find that some of their burning questions cannot be answered by their texts, or that they are ready to outgrow their current text set and find more resources. This is where you can teach them that passionate researchers go on; they do more. They show agency as readers and thinkers. Some of your students will be scientists and historians and social activists one day—and the first step to achieving in any field is to be willing to work hard, as Gladwell shows again and again in *Outliers*. Take the opportunity, therefore, to teach your students here how to differentiate websites that end in .org (not-for-profit), .gov (government), and .edu (educational institutions) from .com, which might be for profit or highly biased. Teach them how to do library searches, how to talk to librarians, how to seek local experts, and how to visit museums. Teach them to look inside and outside of books, to pursue their interests, and to seek knowledge. The Common Core State Standards talk about this in the research section.

The well-deserved celebration at the conclusion of this invigorating scholarship might have you setting students up to teach others in the school community what they have learned from their research and thinking, especially the angle on their learning that they consider most significant. Partners and clubs who have read many books on a topic can come together and plan a presentation that they’ll make to the rest of the class, or to another class, on the shared topic they studied. Students in their clubs might each take one part of their studied topic and teach that part to others. They may make a poster board including diagrams or charts. They may choose to read a part and act it out or make a model or put together a PowerPoint presentation or make some social action artwork to educate their community. These presentations are meant to be simple and fairly quick, but can help solidify what students have learned and add interest and investment to the topic studied.

## Additional Resources

---

The two parts of this unit are detailed in the book *Navigating Nonfiction* from the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading: A Curriculum for Reading Workshop*. We decided to begin the work with the third part of the book because we assume that your class has just spent the last month reading voraciously through nonfiction texts, determining importance, synthesizing, and using text structures to comprehend the text.

You'll know your students are ready for this unit if they are able to navigate a single nonfiction text at their level with some ease, using the text features to navigate the text, reaching for a pen to do quick jotting of a main idea or two, and turning to a partner to talk about what they've learned as they finish reading. If your children need more support with this work, such as determining the main ideas and making meaning out of their texts, then you will want to refer to the write-up for Unit Three: "Navigating Expository and Narrative Nonfiction." If most of your kids do that well, they're ready to start reading more than one text on a subject. If you have just a handful of readers who struggle with nonfiction, these resources can help to inform your conferring and small-group work with those children.

You'll want to look at your students' Post-its because they will serve as a great assessment for you as you tailor your instruction to your class' specific needs. If you notice that they are copying down fact after fact, word for word, you'll probably want to spend more time teaching into the strategies in the unit on determining importance and taking notes. For more note-taking strategies you might want to consult our Content Area Calendar for Grades 3–5, in particular Units One and Two. If some of your children are having trouble using the domain language of the topic they are studying, you will probably want to work with them on using their word banks in conversations as well as revising some of their jottings to incorporate the technical vocabulary. Essentially, you'll want to move beyond looking at whether children are jotting as they read and study the level of sophistication of their notes. Also, see how your students use their Post-its and jottings when they get ready to talk to their research groups. If students are bringing Post-its to conversations that lead to dead ends, you may use "mentor Post-its," or sophisticated Post-its crafted by you or other students, to show how some jotting can lead to rich discussions.

If many of your students are having trouble critiquing texts, you may decide to do this work in just the read-aloud, where you can support and coach your readers. Whether it happens during read-aloud or in the reading workshop, you will want to be sure that your readers are critiquing texts because this work will continue in the historical fiction unit that follows. During that unit, you will want to be able to build upon this work and support children in critiquing with increased independence.

By the end of this unit of study, you should see a marked improvement in your students' ability to read across nonfiction texts and analyze these for meaning, craft, and perspective. You may decide that students should have an opportunity to do this work again in social studies and science, so that kids get repeated practice with this work.

Just as in the last unit of study on nonfiction, maintaining reading volume will be critical during this time. Resources can be hard to find, and it is likely that you will not have enough just-right nonfiction for your class to sustain just-right reading throughout reading workshop. If this is the case, keep independent fiction reading going throughout the unit.

During reading workshop, be sure to watch your children, studying their levels of engagement. When you see a child who is struggling with a text, help her to find an easier one or provide a book introduction to help her navigate the harder text. Remember, during this unit, children will be working in groups to quickly research a topic. The group can work together to support each other in comprehending text, providing book introductions for each other, or providing information when necessary. You could look at these groups as if they were a guided reading group, working with them over a series of days to move them as readers.

You may want to adapt these plans, depending on the particular needs of your own fifth graders. If you decide to forge your own pathway, think about how to make the parts of your unit seem coherent and logical, so that readers feel as if they are on a pathway that will inevitably help them emerge as more powerful and independent readers and thinkers.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

---

### **Part One: Synthesizing Complex Information across Diverse Texts and Working in the Company of Fellow Researchers**

- “Readers, right now, you can choose topics that will become your areas of expertise. To embark on a learning project, you gather and preview a collection of texts, mapping out the lay of the land between those texts much as we mapped out the lay of the land within a text. This then can help you plan your learning journey.”
- “Readers, today I want to teach you that when you are reading—whether it is about penguins or hurricanes, insects or castles, or anything else—you can dig because you’ve been forced to do so, or you can dig because you’re digging for treasure! Someone watching nearby might not be able to decipher the difference, but there’s a world of difference between the two. So, readers, dig for treasure. Read for treasure.”
- “Readers, today I want to give you a tip to help you go from good to great in your reading and research. When you become an expert on a topic, it is important to begin using the technical vocabulary of that subject. Even if you’re really just beginning to learn about a subject, you can accelerate your learning curve by ‘talking the talk.’”

- “We don’t do research just to become fact-combers, collecting facts like a beachcomber might collect pretty shells. We cup our hands around one bit of the world—and for our class as a whole and for one of your groups, that bit has been penguins—because we want to become wiser about the world. Specifically, today I want to teach you that researchers need not only to collect, but researchers also need to think.”

## **Part Two: Critiquing Texts with Analytical Lenses and Sharing Our Research**

- “Readers, today I want to teach you that researchers don’t just take in knowledge. We also construct mental models that represent our ideas about a topic. And the mental models that we construct influence what information we notice, what we decide to record, and what we think as we read our nonfiction texts. Since we are building mental models, things become significant to us that we wouldn’t ordinarily even notice.”
- “Today I want to teach you that as we identify what authors make us *feel* about a subject, we also investigate *how* the author caused those feelings to get stirred up. Readers pay close attention, for example, to the images, the stories, and the choice of information that authors include and how those stir up emotional responses in us as readers.”
- “Today I want to teach you that once you have your burning questions or hunches and you can’t answer them on your own, you can look inside or outside of a book for the answers.”
- “Today I want to teach you that eventually, research leads to a burning urge to teach others. We decide what we want to say and organize what we know, and we decide how to share information and ideas with our communities, through presentations, artwork, and multimedia.”
- “Readers, today, on the day before our celebration, on the day when we say goodbye to this unit on nonfiction reading, let’s remember that when we finish reading a nonfiction text, that text lives with us. It walks down the street with us. We carry our nonfiction reading with us, using it to find direction in our world.”



## UNIT FIVE

# Historical Fiction Book Clubs or Fantasy Book Clubs

**JANUARY/ FEBRUARY**  
(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: T/U)

*Note to teachers: this month, we are offering a choice between historical fiction or fantasy. You will have the chance at the end of the year to take up whichever genre you leave aside at this time. Both of these genres offer opportunities for your writers to extend their narrative writing skills and to connect deeply to reading through apprenticeship to authors in the same genre. We do recommend that, whichever genre you select, you also teach the same genre in your writing workshop. (The 2011–2012 Writing Curricular Calendar offers these same choices for this month.)*

### Option One: Historical Fiction Book Clubs

Historical fiction creates an opportunity for you to teach your students to tackle complex texts, in the company of their friends. Because historical fiction is inherently complicated—it happens in a time and a place the reader has never inhabited, the characters are entangled in historical and social issues of grand significance, and the events of the story are intimately related to real historical events—students have opportunities to harness all the teaching you’ve done up to this point in the year and to learn new reading skills that will really pay off for them in these books. Your goal is for your kids to emerge from this unit of study as knowledgeable readers who have new confidence in tackling complicated literature. They’ll also learn how to build collective interpretations, how to listen closely to each other as they read, and how to carry ideas across time—both across the days of their book club discussions and

across more than one text. It's an invigorating unit of study for readers of any age. And historical fiction is deeply romantic and wildly exciting, with dramatic plotlines and adventurous characters. There are reasons that *Titanic* was the most popular teen movie, that market research showed that preteen girls watched it on average twelve times in the first year of its release, and that so many boys have longed to watch *Gladiator*—it's the urge to be lifted out of ordinary lives and imagine lives of great adventure and heroism.

However, before embarking on this unit, think about the reading level of the majority of your readers. This unit is best for students reading levels P and above. If your students are below this level, we suggest that you consider the Series unit on the third-grade calendar—it is a favorite unit, full of support for inference and other reading skills. If you decide to teach that third-grade Series unit to your fourth graders, you may also want to bring in some of the drumroll from the fifth-grade calendar's June unit, "Reading Like a Fan: Author Study." Of course, as with any unit, one major goal is to move your students up levels of text complexity, as encouraged by the Common Core State Standards. It will be up to you to determine if this unit will accomplish that goal with your students.

Even if your students are well above the P-level cutoff, you will want to continue making sure you support their growing abilities to handle increasingly complex text. This unit is designed to support that work—just make sure that students are in books that represent the point of opportunity for them. Matching readers to books doesn't mean that they're all reading easy-as-pie texts. It means that they're encountering that magical mix of challenge and support that ensures engagement. You will probably want to talk up the fact that reading clubs provide readers with the group solidarity that allows each member to aspire to grow, reaching toward more ambitious goals. One way to do this is to be willing to tackle texts that are more complex and nuanced than anyone has read before. If you are moving some readers into challenging texts, in addition to the support of a club, you can also provide those readers with book introductions, with film versions of the start of a book, or with background information on the time period. Often parents are willing to help out by reading a few chapters aloud to a reader and talking deeply about them—this is very helpful at the start of a book, especially. Parents can help also simply by reading the same book, in sync with a reader, and talking with great interest about the book.

If you have some readers who have not progressed as you'd expect over the course of the year, now is a good time to blow the whistle, to declare this as an emergency, and to gather all stakeholders together around an intervention. Does this reader need to spend an hour after school, in the building, reading? Does this reader need to double the amount of reading he or she is doing at home? Might a middle school reading buddy be employed as a mentor?

The essentials of this unit closely follow the unit that was researched and documented in *Tackling Complex Texts: Historical Fiction Book Clubs*, from the Units of Study in Reading. That is, Part One focuses on deep comprehension and synthesis of complex story elements, as well as on launching book clubs with high levels of engagement



and independence. Part Two focuses on interpretation, especially on paying attention to perspective and point of view, and on carrying ideas across a text. Part Three helps readers move across texts, both fiction and nonfiction, developing readers' thematic understanding and potential as social activists. We've included a detailed description of these teaching points at the end of the unit. Where this unit diverges from *Tackling Complex Texts* is that it now parallels the historical fiction writing unit.

At the beginning of this unit, you'll aim to teach readers to read complex texts with deep comprehension. The characters in these books live in places where our students have not lived, in times they have not known. Readers must figure out the nature of the setting, the ways people live, and who the characters are, as well as the relationship the characters have to historical tensions. As students read deeply to analyze characters, settings, and events in their stories and determine the relationships between those elements, they will be doing some of the important work encouraged by the Common Core State Standards. The reading work will be appropriately intense, and you'll want to start readers off on a strong foot by focusing on strategies that will aid their synthesis of emerging plots. With support from a book club, readers will learn to keep track of (often multiple) plotlines, of unfamiliar characters, and of shifts in time and place. You'll want to alert readers that they must often synthesize several crucial subplots, some of which involve unexplained gaps in time and unfamiliar circumstances and consequences. You might choose to read, for instance, *Number the Stars*, in which the main character, Annemarie, doesn't fully understand how or why Denmark has been occupied by the Nazis or the role her family is playing in the Resistance. The reader, therefore, sometimes moves ahead of the main character in synthesizing details.

Like synthesis, envisioning in this month will hold new challenges. Readers may already have made a mental movie of their reading before this; in fact, you might have explicitly taught envisioning earlier in the school year. But because the time, place, and political circumstances mentioned in their historic novels may be unfamiliar and because the setting is more than a passive backdrop and contributes so actively to the plot, readers will need help, from the very start of their historic fiction novels, to see and feel the worlds of their stories. They'll need support to imagine these worlds from the unlikely perspectives of protagonists often markedly different from themselves. It was one thing to step into the shoes of a socially ostracized American child in *The Tiger Rising* (the backdrop of a school bus, motel, and bullying are within the reach of our readers' imaginations) but another thing altogether to step into the shoes of a young Danish girl whose sister has been murdered, whose country has been invaded, and whose decisions may mean life or death to others. Readers might not have as *ready* a schema to envision Denmark during World War II, so you'll want to draw on all possible resources (for example, historical images, movie clips, and social studies texts) to augment readers' understanding and awareness of this time and place. It will require additional preparation on your part to have these supplementary textual and media resources lined up, but the payback will be great in terms of children's awareness and understanding of history and their ability to empathize with distant characters.

Inherent in this genre, therefore, is the potential to overlap and integrate nonfiction texts, possibly from your social studies curriculum. In any case, you will set up intertextual resources for book clubs so that they may look at specific historical eras such as the Civil War or the French Revolution through the lens of not *one* but *several* novels and/or picture books. A book club reading Avi's *Prairie School* might also read MacLachlan's Sarah, Plain and Tall series or other books documenting the era of westward expansion to understand (and compare) the life and times described in each. Students will grow their understanding of a topic by reading multiple accounts of the same historical events. In other words, book clubs in this month will be organized not around one specific *book* but rather around one specific historical *era*, and you can set the expectation that they will read *several* novels dealing with this particular era. You'll establish this expectation to ensure, first, that readers are keeping up with their requisite reading volume and, second, because the familiarity with one specific historical era in which their multiple books are set will provide its own scaffold. As students learn about their historical moments across texts, they will accomplish some of the goals set forth by the Common Core State Standards. With the support of multiple texts on the same time period, they will be offered opportunities to "compare and contrast the overall structure (for example, chronology, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution) of events, ideas, concepts, or information in two or more texts" and "analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent." You'll want each book club to have a text set containing multilevel books dealing with their one historical era, so that easier texts may introduce an era and scaffold the understanding of the harder texts set in the same era. Of course, you'll also fall back on your previous assessment notes on individual readers to ascertain that books in each club's text sets conform to the reading levels of the children within that club. Typically, you'd want to have at least one book in the set that is decidedly lower in level than the reading levels of the children in that club—this book may serve as a crutch for understanding the historical details referenced in the harder texts.

The ambitiousness of this genre, and this unit, does not end with the introduction of a distant time or place. Historical fiction novels don't merely reference other time periods; they also often introduce young readers to large, complicated themes that have recurred in human history and continue to be relevant today. By developing ideas about theme, students will be reaching the high standards of the Common Core State Standards, which emphasize that students be able to "determine a theme of a story . . . from the details in the text, including how characters in a story . . . respond to challenges." Students will draw on their thematic understanding of individual stories to develop bigger ideas about the themes of the entire time period. Therefore, while you can expect the book clubs in your room to begin the month with discussions of a main character's problems and to progress through the month tackling complex plots together, you will prepare for the fact that book club conversations toward the *end* of this month will touch on issues such as war, oppression, famine, and migration. You'll want to explicitly teach clubs to linger at significant or poignant

moments in texts to actively interpret what the story might really be about. Whether it is a young girl struggling to assert her independence against the backdrop of the Dust Bowl or two boys struggling to cross the color line during a civil rights movement, you can expect that most historical fiction will teach lessons about human endurance or social justice, and you will tune your instruction accordingly, nudging book club conversations into interpreting historical fiction novels' underlying themes. As readers become more adept at talking and thinking thematically about their books, you'll want to teach them to recognize that most themes recur across texts and across times. Themes about courage or friendship, for example, can be seen in novels about Nazi Europe, westward expansion, or the civil rights movement. You'll want to celebrate that your children, during this unit of study, are coming to understand that reading is about learning how to live.

## Gathering Resources Before the Unit Begins: Taking Stock of Your Library

---

Before beginning this unit of study, the most important question is: do you have enough historical fiction books so that students can read books at the appropriate level and make choices about what they read? All our studies, and those of Richard Allington, show that students need to be reading with high volume and high interest all of the time—and we know that interest and choice go hand-in-hand. This means that within the unit, you'll need enough books at your children's just-right levels so that they can still choose books they want to read. Don't put a reader in books that he or she cannot read or doesn't want to read just so that the reader can "be in the unit." Be particularly thoughtful of the needs of your struggling readers. Even more than others, these students need to be reading a lot, and they need to read books that they find fascinating. So first, look at your book choices and do everything possible to gather many titles at various levels. You will also need to do some good book talks about the books that you have available, so you can lure your children to them. We included some "time travel" books such as *Magic Treehouse*, to make available more lower-level books for students. The *American Girl* historical fiction novels, with their accompanying nonfiction texts, are also good choices.

Throughout the month, of course, you will keep your eye on students who don't seem well-matched to texts and double-check them with a quick assessment of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. Your readers need to be holding books they can read independently, not just with support!

## Part One: Tackling Complex Texts in the Company of Friends

---

One way to start this unit of study is to begin with a quick read-aloud of a picture book, such as Roberto Innocente's *Rose Blanche*. As you read (and analyze the pictures),

you'll teach your students to really synthesize the clues about what kind of place this is. That means not only identifying the place and time (a small town in Germany during World War II) but also paying attention to details that clue the reader in to what *kind* of place it is—what the mood or atmosphere is. For instance, in *Rose Blanche*, the town is beginning to have trucks full of soldiers, and the streets are becoming crowded and dangerous, and there are flags with swastikas on every building. So the mood is oppressive and scary to the narrator, Rose.

Readers who have had a steady diet of realistic fiction often let the settings in their novels fly by them. Picture the setting in *Amber Brown*. It's a school classroom, a bedroom, a kitchen, but it never plays an especially important role in the novels. The settings in N/O/P/Q books also tend to be fairly static. Wayside School is described once at the start of the story, but the place itself does not undergo major developments as the plot of the book unfolds. Instead, the setting provides the backdrop. Then, too, in books below levels P or Q, the story could often be transplanted to a different setting without the entire plotline changing. Once readers progress to higher levels of text difficulty, the settings often become less familiar and more dynamic and also more essential to the story. In more complicated texts, though, especially stories in the R/S/T band and above, the setting becomes significant. It may even function as part of the problem that a character has to overcome—sometimes by *leaving* altogether, such as in stories that describe Jewish families escaping the Holocaust or Irish people migrating to a new land because of the famine. A natural disaster, or invasion by a hostile enemy, might change the setting completely. The setting may operate at a symbolic level, too: the dust of the prairie may mean more than simply that the land is dry.

Apart from teaching your students to be alert for clues about the physical setting, you might also want to explore the setting as an emotional space as the story progresses. Is this the kind of town where people are good to each other or where groups fear and mistrust each other? Is it a place that is on the brink of change or that has been swept up in a war? What is the mood of this place? Then too, you'll teach readers to pay attention to descriptive, transitional passages that tell about daily life—for example, about how a character gets from one place to another. You'll teach that these can't be bypassed because they often reveal a great deal about the world in which the story is set. Readers need to infer all that is implicit in what is given to them. Part of this involves reading with attentiveness not just to the concrete facts of the setting but to tone and mood. Readers should come to realize that nothing that happens in a story is included accidentally. If the lightning flashes and the dark clouds rumble, the impending storm is included in the story for a purpose, and readers profit from thinking, "Why might the author have made it storm just now? What am I supposed to be thinking?" These will be new questions for your readers. They'll emerge from their study of settings more prepared to tackle the complex shifts in settings in any novel. They will also help students do the work, outlined in the Common Core State Standards, of comparing and contrasting "two or more characters, settings, or events in a story. . . , drawing on specific details in the text."

As you do this work, you'll want to coach into clubs right away. The truth is that no single reader will notice as much, or synthesize as many details, as a small group of readers. So you'll coach your students to listen carefully to each other, build on each other's comments, and honor relationships so that every club member feels valued.

Next, you'll teach your students that historical fiction, from the very first page, presents the reader with a tremendous amount of crucial information not only about the kind of place the story is set but also about the kind of people who will occupy the story. In these novels, as in all good novels, details matter. If you learn something on page 2, or in Chapter One, it's because you're going to need it later in the story. Historical fiction, at the levels at which your children are probably reading, moves swiftly. Readers need to gather a lot of information quickly. And so you'll teach your readers to accumulate and synthesize details. You'll want to teach your readers some strategies for quickly synthesizing details, so that they can pin these to an imaginary "felt board" where they can keep track of all the incoming information. You may find it helpful to show a short film clip, such as the opening three minutes of *Mulan* (the Walt Disney feature animation), to demonstrate to readers how much information is usually given at the start of a historical fiction text. Right away, readers are given information about the important characters, their world and way of life, and the challenges and conflicts they face. Some struggling readers find that talking about a film clip raises their engagement and their ability to pay attention to detail, and they can bring this engagement then to their books.

As your readers begin to realize that every detail matters in their stories, they'll also begin to notice gaps in their knowledge, perhaps from places where time moves fast or where there are flashbacks. Essential reading tools such as timelines, graphic organizers, and lists of characters, which your readers may not have needed for a time, now become important tools again. This is key, because one thing you'll be teaching is that good readers don't wait for a teacher to tell them how to use their comprehension strategies. Strong readers know that as their books get harder, they have to work harder, and you want to ensure that they know how to do this. A reading curriculum, like a writing curriculum, spirals. As students move up levels into harder books, they'll find that they need to consciously harness comprehension strategies that were helpful to them in the past. You'll model much of that crucial reading work, showing your students how to use multiple strategies to make sense of what they are reading. You'll remind them to use their pencils as they read. You'll remind them to reread on the run, which must become automatic if they are to tackle the kinds of complicated texts that await them.

Timelines will be particularly important. In historical fiction, it's often useful to create a timeline of historical events, as well as a timeline of pivotal moments for the main character. That way, you and your readers can begin to analyze the relationship between the main character and historical events. When does history affect the main character, and vice versa? It's important for historical fiction readers to understand that the characters exist in a relationship with history. Ultimately, this understanding will help readers with any complex novel, because characters never exist in a vacuum



but are always affected by the social pressures, community norms, and forces around them. Historical fiction novels simply require readers to wrap our minds around a greater *volume* of context. There is the personal story of the main character, the subplots of side characters, and the historical backdrop of an era, all with their own changing timelines. It is not always clear at the outset that these different timelines bear any connection to each other or that they are intertwined. You'll want to teach readers new to this genre (and especially those new to texts at levels P/Q and beyond) how to keep track of several simultaneously unfolding timelines or plots. You may model this using *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* by Grace Lin (2009), a Common Core State Standards–recommended book, which has a clear story that unfolds over time within its historical moment.

Next, readers are probably ready to start thinking about the point of view of the main character, which may be radically different from the reader's point of view. That is, the main character experiences the world differently than the reader. So it's critical to be able to suspend our own judgments, and then try to compare and analyze how and why the main character behaves the way he or she does. It's only when we realize that the soldier who stops Annemarie and Ellen from running in the street is a Nazi, and that Ellen is Jewish, and that he is not their local friendly policeman, that we can understand why Ellen is speechless with fear in the first scene and how brave Annemarie is to stand up to the soldier. The reader has to separate his or her own perspective and frame of reference from that of the character—a skill emphasized in the Common Core State Standards starting in third grade. As students analyze the point of view of their characters, they will also come to understand the point of view of their authors. The Common Core State Standards for Reading emphasize that students should “describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.” Further, the Common Core State Standards for social studies emphasize identifying “aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose.” Student investigation of point of view in texts will both develop their understanding about historical moments and bring them to an understanding of their own points of view.

## Part Two: Interpreting Complex Texts

---

As the unit unfolds, your readers will embark upon the heady intellectual work of interpretation. It's easy for children to get caught up in the action of historical fiction and the alluring settings, but you'll want to teach them that just as the fiction books they've read are about more than just plot, so are historical fiction books. They'll need to look beyond what's happening to uncover the ideas and themes that underlie the books they read during this unit, especially as these books become more complex. You'll want them to understand that each book they read will be about more than one idea. This is new work for a lot of readers, especially young readers who came of age searching for a central, or main, idea in a text. In this part of the unit, you'll teach your



students that reading is about drafting and revising ideas. You'll do this work with your students first within one text, then across texts, and finally between texts and their lives. You'll teach your readers to grow nuanced ideas and to read to be changed by the new worlds and characters we encounter.

It's crucial to understand that this interpretation work is not about teaching kids to recite back an idea that a teacher gives them. You will not tell them "the theme" of a book or send them off to seek evidence for an idea they did not develop themselves. You will not skip the hard intellectual work that kids need to do to grapple with themes. Instead, your goal is that your students learn to articulate significant ideas about their books, that they learn to revise those ideas on their own, and that they learn to reconsider, elaborate on, and defend those ideas in the company of other readers.

You'll begin the interpretation work in this unit, therefore, by teaching your students to author their own responses. Too often, in too many places, kids are taught that they don't matter in the curriculum. Not here. Not in your classroom. You'll teach your students that what they bring to texts matters. You'll show them that what they notice in texts is intricately related to their personal and ethical concerns, to the history they bring to the page. You may also reveal how your history informs your own reading response, showing how you sometimes read as a big sister or sometimes as a victim of bullying or sometimes as an expert on a historical time period. Your students don't need to know this, but you'll be depending on the reading response theories of Louise Rosenblatt. You'll teach that the meaning of a text lies between the book and the reader. It exists in the union of the words on the page and the mind reading those words. What really matters is that your kids learn that they matter—that what they bring to reading shapes their understanding.

As you teach this first lesson, you'll emphasize that just as no one can tell a reader what or how to think about a story, there is no "right" idea about a story. Each reader brings his or her own history to a book, so that what you might think is important, such as how Annemarie struggles to be a good friend, might be different than what I focus on, such as that she is a better friend than she is a sister. I might notice that because I too struggle to be a decent sibling—it feels harder than being a loyal friend. It's crucial to teach your students that their own responses and feelings matter. Otherwise, they'll be waiting for you to tell them what to think!

You'll probably then want to teach a lesson where you encourage your readers to pause as they read, lingering in certain passages—usually the extra dramatic or surprising ones, where they feel as if there is a sense that what is happening now is connected to other parts of the story or could be tremendously important to the character's development. It's almost as if those parts of the story are written in bold. Readers linger in those parts, jot about them, reread them with their clubs, compare their thinking, connect them to other parts, and have long discussions about them again and again. Often readers come away from certain passages with big ideas they are going to carry with them for the rest of the book.

You can expect your readers, once they have some big ideas, to need support in grounding those ideas in details. So again, you'll teach your readers that in good books, details matter and that perceptive readers accumulate and string together details. It matters, for instance, that Annemarie finds a Star of David imprinted in her palm after clutching Ellen's necklace to hide it from the German soldiers. As your readers begin to follow ideas, they can keep track of details that support those ideas, and details that lead them to related ideas as well. They'll learn to be extra alert readers, just as alert fans notice so much more at a baseball game than do inexperienced viewers. You'll teach your readers to almost wear special lenses as they develop ideas—lenses that help them maintain a focus on some of those ideas as they read. They'll keep those ideas—those interpretations—in mind as they read, thinking, "Ah yes!" or "Huh? That doesn't fit." Perhaps they will want to jot themselves notes about the lenses they plan to read with each day. That way, clubs won't end up losing track of their ideas or losing their focus.

The main goal of this part is for kids to value their own ideas about books and then hold onto these as they read, grounding them in details, deepening them, and sharing them with others. But it's important, too, that children remain open to new ideas. We want them to be able to widen their thinking, not hold so steadfastly to one or two ideas that they cannot embrace changing thoughts and interpretations as they push further into their books. So we suggest that you end this part by teaching your students that good stories are about more than one idea and that to read a book with complexity is to be open to a journey of thought, not just a single thought. You'll also want to nudge kids to revise their understandings as these change. Too often, young readers may reject or ignore parts of the story that don't fit an idea they came up with early on. So you'll teach them that it's okay to change their minds as you read and as they listen to the ideas of their fellow book club members. Thoughtful readers keep our horizons open as we read, and we use conversation as well as our individual observations to broaden our understandings.

The interpretive work students do in Part Two of historical fiction can parallel some of the work they do in social issues book clubs—reading to foster social justice. They can learn to raise burning questions in their book clubs about why history unfolds the way it does, how individual stories bear witness to suffering and courage, and what lessons we can take from characters' experiences. Their jottings and conversations will grow as you coach into this synthesis work, helping them place two ideas next to each other to form a new, more nuanced one. The book club work will be tremendously important here as your kids learn that their ideas are more powerful in coalition than when they work alone. Indeed, one of the most significant lessons of this unit, and we hope one of the most lasting, will be that children's greatest strength lies in building thoughts off their talk with each other. You'll want to facilitate such talk by providing literary language for some of the things readers are intuitively seeing in their books but can't precisely name. You might teach readers to use allusions, figurative language, and symbolism to convey ideas that are not easily contained in ordinary language.

## Part Three: Becoming More Complex Because We Read

---

The Common Core State Standards ask students to not only separate their perspective from that of the main character but also to discern the various perspectives of different characters within a story. You'll teach your readers, therefore, to look closely at a scene and imagine the different points of view that characters in that scene bring to the action. How might the young German soldier feel who is searching for hidden Jewish children in Annemarie's apartment? How might young, Jewish Ellen feel at that moment, as compared to Annemarie? There is abundant information in the text about Annemarie's inner thinking and emotions, but the reader can only imagine Ellen's feelings from her silence—and only a critical reader would pause to consider the soldier's point of view. So you'll be teaching into critical literacy at this point in the unit as well. And you'll be helping your readers to become more empathetic and imaginative, as well as more observant and discerning.

Another way to teach into critical literacy is to teach your students to reanalyze their stories, or parts of them, through the lens of power. This work often leads them to new thinking, especially for readers of this age, who haven't often thought about power and resistance, although they may *feel* powerless often. You'll teach your students to ask themselves who has power, how is power visible, what forms can power take, and how does power shift. For instance, power is not always about weapons or physical strength. In the end, it is not physical prowess that defeats the Germans' attempt in *Number the Stars* to round up the Jews in Denmark. It is the power of community, integrity, and collective courage.

If you haven't done so yet, you'll want to make sure that your students now have the opportunity to read some nonfiction alongside their fiction. This doesn't have to mean that you create enormous text sets, ravage your libraries, and do big book orders. You could simply type up some statistics or download some simple fact sheets or articles. Knowing how many children died in the Holocaust, for example, gives the reader an even greater sense of what was at stake when the Johansens took it upon themselves to hide Ellen in *Number the Stars*. It's also helpful to have some images, so that students can use these as references while they envision. Even though children will have learned that the books they are reading are set during real-life events, they may experience these events and characters at a certain distance because they are reading about them against the backdrop of fiction. It is one thing to read about Blanche Rose's plight or Lise and Peter's bravery and quite another to see photographs of Anne Frank and Miep Gies and other real people who experienced the Holocaust, or other historical events, firsthand.

As your readers add in nonfiction reading, teach them to begin to talk about ideas across texts—both fiction and nonfiction. The idea that war teaches children to grow up fast, for instance, is true not only in *Number the Stars* but also in *The Butterfly*, and also in any images you download from the American Holocaust Museum site. This work, of realizing that an idea a reader has in one text can be true in another text, is revolutionary for young readers. They'll begin to see themes everywhere. So you

won't have to build text sets around themes—in fact, you don't want to. You want your readers to begin to imagine that each text they read can be read in comparison to other texts, almost as if they are making virtual text sets. You'll teach your readers, then, to look closely at something the Common Core State Standards emphasize, which is *how* each text develops a theme—to compare and contrast multiple books with the same theme, analyzing carefully and using details as evidence for their ideas.

Another way to use comparison to deepen thinking is by teaching your students the art of allusion. Sometimes, readers want to say so much about a story, yet they struggle to find words that contain thoughts so big. Rather than searching for all the right words, they can compare the story or the character to another story or character who is familiar to their audience. If a reader says, for instance, that the main character in the story he or she is reading is as clever and self-sacrificing as Charlotte in *Charlotte's Web*, we know what that means. So saying that a character grows up fast, like Annemarie, or pays a price for her courage, like Rose Blanche, will convey huge meaning. The Common Core State Standards name the ability to make allusions as a key part of understanding literary traditions and archetypes—the foundations of cultural literacy.

As you bring this unit to a close, invite children to step back a little from the historical worlds they've stepped into, and from the heady interpretation work they've been doing within and across texts, to think more largely about the meaning these tales bear for their own lives—and for the world at large. What does it mean to them, for example, that Mama in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* covers up the offensive notations in her seventh-grade students' texts so that they do not have to be humiliated by seeing these everyday? How are we affected by that decision and by the school's response of firing her? What can we learn from Annemarie's decision, in a moment of high stakes, to rip off her best friend's Star of David necklace, which identifies Ellen's Jewishness and now potentially marks Annemarie, too? There are lessons in these defining choices that characters make, and you'll want your students to think deeply about them, to be affected by them, and to live differently because of them.

---

## Use Your Read-Aloud to Support the Unit

---

Plan to use your read-alouds to anchor this unit. If you decide to focus your read-aloud on one historical event—World War II, for instance—you might read aloud the chapter book *Number the Stars*, which is full of teaching opportunities. But you might decide to introduce this event in history by first sharing a picture book or two (*Rose Blanche*, *Terrible Things*, and *The Butterfly* are a few we recommend), and then you'd probably want to read aloud several more books across the unit, of varied lengths, all about World War II. If you decide to have students reading books from a variety of time periods, your class read-aloud could also switch time periods. As you make these decisions, consider that your read-aloud will serve as a touchstone for the critical reading and interpretive work you teach.

In turn-and-talk you might say things like:

- “So the main character is facing a big problem. Turn and talk to your club about how you think she may try to solve it.” (prediction, interpretation, intertextuality)
- “Hmm, I’m thinking that if I were this character in this situation, I might have done something different. Stop and jot what you would do. Keep in mind what you know about that time.” (interpretation, envisionment, accumulating the text)
- “So far we’ve gathered a lot of details about the setting! Stop and jot how you think the setting is affecting the main character.” (determining importance, interpretation)
- “How do you think what just happened will affect the character? Turn and tell your partner.” (prediction)
- “How does this situation compare to other experiences or situations we’ve read about?” (intertextuality)

## Integrating the Unit with Social Studies

---

In the historical fiction writing unit, students will be collecting as many new insights as possible about the time period they will ultimately write about, and therefore you might choose to align your social studies instruction with your historical fiction reading and writing work so students have multiple opportunities to explore this time period. For example, in social studies your students might be learning about the Civil War through discussions, trips, film clips, and primary documents—all the while collecting jottings about what they are learning about the period, talking in partnerships and clubs, and creating whole-class word walls and charts gathering their understandings. Simultaneously, in reading workshop, your students will need to read historical fiction from various time periods (so that you can keep everyone “in books”), one of which might be the Civil War. During read-aloud time, you could highlight books set within the Civil War.

Of course, just because you are studying the Civil War doesn’t mean that your students can’t be in related, but broader, topics of book clubs—ones that focus on stories of “war” or “oppression” or “change.” When children read one historical fiction text after another, this provides an excellent opportunity for them to compare texts. This kind of intertextual reading work supports a richer understanding of historical fiction in general. Another way to go, if you feel your social studies materials are not broad or supportive enough, is to lean more heavily on the reading workshop work paired with your social studies unit—using historical fiction book clubs and read-alouds of picture books, short texts, or novels as points of research for your readers.

In both your content study and your reading workshop, you may use word charts, timelines, visuals, and maps to record class understandings of the concepts, events, places, and vocabulary. You may also decide to make a variety of nonfiction texts available, so that students can supplement their reading of historical fiction with informational texts. It's helpful to have nonfiction texts with lots of images, so that students can use these as references while they envision. If there are any crucial historical events in the stories your students will be reading, try to include some texts that explain these events and give some background information on them. Include maps as well, so students get an idea where the stories they are reading take place. Clearly, it will take some work to gather all these resources. You may find that you need to visit your local library or that teachers on a grade level want to rotate baskets of materials to share resources. Remember that many children read nonfiction at lower levels than they read fiction, so keep that in mind when accumulating texts. If it has been a while since many of your students last read nonfiction texts, you may wish to remind them how to focus their learning by looking for the main idea in each section.

## Additional Resources

---

The unit outlined below follows a sequence of teaching points set out in *Tackling Complex Texts: Historical Fiction in Book Clubs* from the series *Units of Study for Teaching Reading: A Curriculum for Reading Workshop*. The lessons are detailed in the book, and therefore, as you embark on this unit, you might reference those texts. The first part of this unit focuses on deep comprehension and synthesizing complex story elements. The second part turns toward interpretation, carrying big ideas across texts and paying attention to point of view. The third, and final, part focuses on reading fiction and nonfiction to deepen readers' thematic understanding.

Historical fiction is a complex genre. Before beginning the unit, you will want to look at your running records and your conference notes and decide if this unit is the time to call your children to action, pushing them to grapple with more complex texts than before, or if you will table the unit for later in the year when your children are ready to read more complex texts. If you look at your data and see that the majority of your class is reading below level P, you might want to consider another unit of study. You might turn toward the third-grade unit, teaching the unit "Series Book Clubs," or the fifth-grade unit, teaching the unit "Author Study: Reading Like a Fan."

If you do decide to teach this unit, this can be a time for you to encourage children to push themselves as readers, tackling more complex texts than in prior units. During this time, children are in book clubs and can support each other with comprehension. Of course, some clubs, and children, will still need additional support from you. You might provide book introductions to help them move into a text as well as do some guided reading whether they are at the beginning, middle, or nearing the end of their book.



As you teach the unit, keep your eye on the work that children are doing. Study their Post-its and reader's notebooks to assess their comprehension. You might find that children are in need of additional support with synthesizing story elements, and therefore, might decide to teach additional lessons on that skill. You might encounter children struggling with growing ideas about their characters, so you might revisit the Post-it to theory work that you taught in the unit, "Following Characters into Meaning," encouraging children to again sort their Post-its into piles of ideas that seem to go together. Then too, you might teach additional lessons on learning from the lives of our characters, seeing the bigger life-lessons, which was also taught in the third part of "Following Characters into Meaning." For more detailed teaching points, you can refer to the unit itself.

If you see some children talking about their books as though they are just fiction stories, not paying attention to the real events and how they are affecting the characters in the story, then you will probably want to do more work on setting and cause-and-effect relationships. Cause-and-effect work is critical to the unit. Children need to understand that the events in history set off a chain reaction, and the characters' actions are part of that chain. You will want to teach that the decisions the characters make are influenced by the events taking place and that the presentation of these decisions is also impacted. If children need more knowledge about the time period to be able to do this work, you might introduce nonfiction materials to help explain the setting earlier than the unit suggests. Then too, you might develop the last three bullets of the first part into a string of minilessons on the different ways that the historical context, or setting, impacts the character.

If your readers were struggling with critical reading in nonfiction, you will not want to delay this skill set any longer. They will need it for the interpretation unit that follows. So, you will want to emphasize the interpretation work throughout this unit. While the interpretive work is in the third part, you might decide to begin this critical reading work earlier, bringing it into your read-aloud where you can coach and support children, preparing them for when they will do this independently. Then, when you do teach the third part, you might decide to linger. You might take the teaching points below and develop them into a string of minilessons, or you might teach additional strategies to support this work. Also, if you know that children will need additional support with this, prepare to teach strategy lessons to small groups.

In addition, be sure to keep your eye on your children's reading logs. As they tackle these complex and sophisticated texts you want to ensure that their volume is not dropping. If you see a dip, if you see children reading fewer pages, then act, and act quickly. Help them to find more time in the day to read and encourage them to track their own progress, setting goals and then putting in the time to reach those goals. Ultimately, volume matters, and it cannot suffer at the expense of increased complexity.

The teaching points below are far from encompassing, nor are they set in stone. They are meant to help you imagine a possible pathway, one that will need to have detours based on your readers. If you decide to forge your own pathway, think about how to make the parts of your unit seem coherent and logical, so that readers feel as

if they are on a pathway that will inevitably help them emerge as more powerful and independent readers and thinkers.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

---

### Part One: Tackling Complex Texts in the Company of Friends

- “Readers, here’s the thing: all of us already know what a setting is in a story. It’s the place where the story, or scene, happens. But today, I want to teach you that in historical fiction, because the setting will inevitably be unfamiliar to us, we have to really pay attention not just to what the place looks like but also to what it feels like—not just to its physical details but to its emotional atmosphere.”
- “Readers, as we begin to invent ideas about reading clubs, I want to also teach you that it’s important, in any club, to take care of relationships within that club. We do that by making sure that we’re creating work where each member will feel a part of something important, and each member will always feel supported by the group.”
- “Specifically, I want to teach you that when the grown-ups in my book club and I began reading our historical fiction books, we found ourselves almost tacking up information we’d need to know on mental bulletin boards. At the start of our books, there was so much information flying past us as we read that we felt as if a lot of our mind work was spent catching the important stuff and almost sorting it so that we began to grasp the who, what, where, when, and why of the book.”
- “Readers, today I want to teach you that when skilled readers read any complex story, and especially when we read historical fiction, we are aware that time is one of the elements in the story that is often complex. Specifically, we are aware that the spotlight of the story is not continually on the here and now. Sometimes the story harkens back to events that have already occurred, earlier in the story or even before the story began.”
- “Today I want to teach you that in historical fiction, there are many timelines. There is the main character’s timeline—a timeline that is a personal narrative or plotline—and there is a historical timeline of the big historical events. And the two are entwined. This is also true in life itself. The events in the main character’s life—in your life and mine—occur alongside, and are affected by, an unfolding timeline of world events. To understand a character, a person, we have to get to know not only the person’s personal timeline but also the historical timeline that winds in and out of the personal timeline.”

- “Today I want to teach you that readers try to understand the decisions that characters make, and we do this in part by keeping in mind that the character’s behavior is shaped by what is happening in the world in which the character lives, that is, by the historical context. And here’s the thing: when different characters respond differently to one event, it is helpful for readers to muse about this, asking ‘Why?’ Usually when different characters act differently this reflects the fact that each of those characters plays a different role in the world and therefore is shaped differently by the times.”
- “Today I want to teach you that sometimes we come to places in a story where the action slows down, where there is more description than action. Readers, trust the author. Be loyal, stay side by side, rather than running ahead alone. Probably the author inserted these details so that you could better imagine this place. In good books, readers can trust that we’ll learn something important through these descriptive passages.”

## **Part Two: Interpreting Complex Texts**

- “Today I want to teach you that when we read novels, and specifically when we study texts really closely, we are looking at . . . (I held up a giant question mark). We are looking at . . . something. And here is the thing. No one can tell you, as a reader, what to look at, what to notice, what to think. One reader and another will tend to notice similar things about what is happening in the story—about the plot. But each reader brings his or her own meaning to the story, and to do that, we let different parts reverberate in our lives. Each one of us is the author of our own reading.”
- “Readers, today I want to remind you that thoughtful readers sometimes press the pause button, lingering to ponder what we’ve read and let a bigger idea begin to grow in our minds. For each reader, there will be passages in a book that seem to be written in bold font, parts that call out to that reader as being important. Often these are passages that harken back to earlier sections in the book and that seem laden with meaning, and we read those passages extra attentively, letting them nudge us to think.”
- “Readers, you are all writing about big ideas and big questions. And today I want to teach you one incredibly important bit of advice. The writer, Richard Price, has said, ‘The bigger the issue, the smaller you write.’ He means that when you are writing about big ideas, you lodge your ideas in the smallest details and objects from the story.”

- “Today I want to teach you that once readers have paused to think deeply about a book, and developed an idea that seems true, from that point on, readers wear special glasses, special lenses, and look at the upcoming text through those lenses. We read on with our interpretation in mind, and say, ‘Ah yes!’ or ‘Huh? That doesn’t fit.’ Doing this is one way that we continue to develop our ideas.”
- “Readers, today I want to teach you that although it is really important to fashion ideas and to care about them, it’s also important to be open to new ideas. You don’t want to read, or to talk, like your knees are locked, like you are determined to not let your mind budge even an inch. The reason to talk and to read, both, is to learn. In a good book, as in a good conversation, you can literally feel your thinking being changed.”

### **Part Three: Becoming More Complex Because We Read**

- “Readers, today I want to teach you that although it is natural to understand a story from the perspective of a main character (because the author lets us see his or her thoughts), it helps to also see a story through the perspective of other characters, characters whose feelings and voices might not have been brought out so clearly. If we try to think about and to see a story through the eyes of someone whose perspective is not shown, this—like trying to see the school through the eyes of a bird—gives us a new way of seeing, and more important, of thinking.”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers also take our ideas through a process of drafting and revision. And just as we have an internalized sense for the qualities of good writing that guides us as we draft and revise in writing, we also need an internalized sense for the qualities of a good interpretation so we can draft and revise our ideas about the texts we are reading.”
- “Readers, today I want to teach you that looking at our books with the lens of power leads to all sorts of new thinking. When we investigate who has power, what form power takes (how you see it), and how power changes, that helps us find huge meanings in books.”
- “Readers, today I want to teach you that we often turn to nonfiction to spark new ideas about our novels. Just as two sticks light a fire when they’re rubbed together, we can rub some bits of nonfiction up against parts of novels and see ideas ignite.”
- “Today I want to teach you that it is important when we read to think about people, places, events—and also about ideas. And when you have thought

about an idea in one story, sometimes that thinking helps you find ideas in another story.”

- “Today I want to teach you that if your head is so full of ideas, your chest feels like it wells with all this huge stuff you have to say, and yet you find yourself sort of sputtering and hemming, you need to know that people who read and who care about books often have things to say for which no ordinary words will do. And the good news is that we can use the same techniques that authors use to say things that are too big for words. One of the things we can do is we can reference a beautiful detail, significant theme, or lasting image—anything really—from a story we all know, and by doing so we conjure up that whole story. People who know it go, ‘Ah yes, yes. I know what you mean.’ That’s called making an allusion, and literate people do this all the time.”
- “Readers, today I want to teach you that when characters face critical moments of choice, when a character must decide how he or she wants to respond, we need to remember that it’s not just the people around that person who are affected by the choices the character makes. We can be as well. We can learn from characters in books, just as we learn from people in our lives, and we can especially learn from the moments of choice that characters face.”

## Option Two: Fantasy Book Clubs

---

Fantasy is one of those genres that stir certain readers to the heights of passion. They read every fantasy series. They see the films. They know when the new books are coming out, and line up in bookstores, sometimes in costume. There’s no doubt that Harry Potter stirred this love, first in young readers, and then in the teachers who saw an entire generation of children and young adults become addicted to a fictional character. Who couldn’t adore a book that got millions of children to read? Over 400 million readers have been in the Harry Potter book club, around the globe. A child who reads every book in the series will read over 4,000 pages of print, will carry a storyline across seven novels, and will need to remember details from the very first novel to understand the complex plot twists and character revelations of the seventh. And the amazing thing about Harry Potter readers is that they do remember details and synthesize across many pages. Everything the Common Core State Standards ask readers to do in terms of complex synthesis and analysis, fantasy readers do. Perhaps it is because they have reread the books. Perhaps it is because they have had so many conversations. Perhaps it is because the books are about more than the stories that unfold. Fantasy books are mostly about the struggle between good and evil. They are about the emergence of something good, even in the darkest times or in the weakest of us. It’s probably that theme, of the essential goodness and courage of mankind, that makes these stories so romantic, intense, and ultimately satisfying.

This unit of study is closely derived from the unit “Learning from the Elves,” in the volume, *Constructing Curriculum* of the series, *Units of Study for Teaching Reading Grades 3–5*, as well as from the new edition of that unit, the small professional book, *A Quick Guide to Teaching Reading through Fantasy Novels*, both by Mary Ehrenworth. In this unit of study, you’ll harness (or launch) children’s passion for fantasy reading as a means of increasing their facility with complex texts and maintaining their collaborative interpretation skills in book clubs in alignment with the Common Core State Standards. You’ll teach your students to pay close attention as they read, assuming that all details matter, accumulating and synthesizing a tremendous density of information. You’ll teach them to read across their novels, noticing patterns, archetypes, and themes.

Some of your students are already avid fantasy readers, and now you’ll be showing them how to unlock even more of the secrets that are in their books, giving them academic language for the literary traditions of these novels, helping them articulate their interpretations with literary conversations. Others of your students will be discovering this genre for the first time. Fantasy readers, once hooked, are usually life-long readers. That some of your students will begin this journey with you is a gift.

This unit of study is designed as a book club unit. The second half of the school year is timely for introducing book clubs in your room, not only to mine the social support these provide (collaborative peer engagement can be the best teacher) but also to ratchet up your students’ ability to think and talk about the increasingly complicated plots and themes in their novels. Since fantasy novels are inherently complex, readers will benefit from the intellectual support of book club conversations, learning to use their book club buddies to build collaborative interpretations. This is a good time for your readers to be accountable for their collaborative reading work. Club members need to help each other get started, explain what they know about how fantasy tends to go, and then talk regularly as the story is unfolding about their observations, expectations, and interpretations.

Like the historical fiction unit, this unit aims to support your students in developing into more powerful readers of complicated texts in alignment with the Common Core State Standards. There may, therefore, be favorite fantasy lessons that you have up your sleeve—more on archetypes and quest structures, more on the myths, legends, and allegories—if so, please tuck those in!

## Gathering and Choosing Books for Read-Aloud and Book Clubs

---

There are so many fantasy series now, which is why this is a great book club unit. From Droon and Dragon Slayers’ Academy, through Spiderwick Chronicles, to the beloved Narnia and Percy Jackson and the Olympians, there are wonderful choices in this genre—and recently, terrific dystopian novels for young readers as well. Get students launched on the first book in a series, and they’ll undoubtedly keep going.



One thing that is particularly helpful about fantasy, for diverse classrooms, is that the lower-level titles don't look particularly childish. All these books have dragons on the covers. And the higher levels allow your highest-level readers to read complicated narratives, without straying into plot developments that are not appropriate for their age.

This is a good time to teach your students that powerful readers seek books. They scrounge their classroom libraries. They go to the public library. They trade with friends and family members, so that they can read the books they want with their friends. Remember that these series, like most series above level M, are meant to be read in order. When readers read the series in the correct order, they're able to do the higher-level reading work of tracing character change over time, of discerning the subplots and emerging themes. When they read the books out of order, they're often submerged in the plot, because that's the only part of the narrative that will make a lot of sense, or even be visible. So if you do get to do any book orders, or are trading books across classrooms, try for the beginnings of series. A recommended book list is included at the end of this write-up.

For read-aloud, you'll probably want to choose one or two shorter books, so you can practice with your students how readers track what has changed at the end of a book and what hasn't, how characters develop across a series, and how themes recur across novels. Good choices are *Dragon Slayers' Academy* (N), and *Deltora Quest* (R/T), which are dense, but short, so that you may be able to read two of them aloud across the unit of study. You may also revisit some favorite picture books, such as *The Paper Bag Princess*, to demonstrate the quest narrative structure, the inclusion of magical animals and realms, and the medieval setting of many fantasy stories.

If you have access to a SMART Board or to a computer, you may find it engaging to show a few trailers or clips of popular fantasy movies, such as *How to Train Your Dragon*, *Harry Potter*, and *Narnia*, because these brief clips vividly demonstrate the different settings of fantasy—how some start in the real world and then magic infuses that world, and others are set in a magical world, which is usually medieval, with horses, swords, dragons, and so forth.

As the Common Core State Standards attest, through extensive reading of stories such as fantasy and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements. By reading texts in history/social studies, science, and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas. Fantasy allows students a glimpse into different cultures or worlds. Students also acquire the habits of reading independently and closely, which are essential to their future success.

## Part One: Launching Your Kids into Fantasy with Zeal, and Then Learning to Build the World of the Story When It's Another World: People, Places, and Plots

---

You might launch your unit by gathering students around your many fantasy novels, their covers adorned with dragons, castles, and symbols. Gesture to these books as you tell your readers that in these tales the fate of all of mankind may rest on the choices made by the main character. Everything is more important, more intense, more vivid in fantasy stories. Explain that when we study fantasy, really, we are studying the human condition. The stories are never really about elves and hobbits. They're about the struggle between good and evil, they're about how power sometimes corrupts, they're about the quest to be better than we are, they're about how even the smallest of us can affect what happens in this world. Finally, give your students a vision of where they're heading as readers, explaining that as we become powerful readers of fantasy, we're likely to become more powerful readers of all texts.

Your readers will be rapt, eager to pick up these novels and get started. It is important that students determine the kind of place in which their story is happening. Because the novels are so complicated, you'll want to teach students that fantasy readers use multiple resources to research the settings of our stories. We look for clues about the time period and the magical elements, in particular, using the cover, blurbs, and details from the beginning of the story for our research. You might demonstrate how you synthesize these details from the cover of a book such as *The Paper Bag Princess*, and then let your students try doing so using *Dragon Slayers' Academy* or any of the books you have gathered. If your students are adept at constructing the setting in their stories, particularly if they have done this work in historical fiction, or they are already avid fantasy readers, then take this teaching to the next level by teaching them how to analyze the setting for its psychological implications as well as its physical. In *The Paper Bag Princess*, Elizabeth doesn't just live in a world with dragons. She lives in a world where sudden violence can destroy all that you have. As you set children up to think about the *atmosphere* of the setting, show them how to not simply describe it but to *analyze* it, so that you lift their work to the level that the Common Core requires.

Next, you may teach your students that fantasy readers expect to learn alongside the main character. That is, often the main character sets out on an adventure and has to figure out what the rules are about the place where that adventure, or quest, takes place. Harry has to learn about Hogwarts and the magical world. Percy has to learn about half-bloods. Wiglaf has to learn about Dragon Slayer Academy. As these characters learn, visibly, about the values, beliefs, and customs of this place, the reader is supposed to learn as well. It's one way the author educates the reader, through the explicit learning experiences of the character. Many younger readers don't realize that there are clues in complex novels that alert them to times when they should sit up and take notice because an important bit of information is going to be conveyed. For your stronger readers, you may also show them how in complex novels, sometimes

the reader synthesizes information ahead of the character—that is, our understanding comes before the main character’s, because we infer more rapidly than he or she. It’s the way readers knew that Bella, in *Twilight*, was in love with a vampire before she knew or realized that Harry himself was perhaps a horcrux, before Harry did, in the Harry Potter books.

You’ll also want to remind your readers to do the work they do in any novel, such as to pay attention to the inner as well as the outer struggles of their characters. In fantasy novels, as with many complex novels, the characters face more than one struggle. Some of their struggles are placed on them from the outside. Harry struggles and battles with Voldemort, for instance. But some of their struggles are internal, such as the way Harry misses his parents so much. You’ll want, therefore, to teach readers to track the multiple problems faced by characters. There are also grander cohorts of characters, so that it’s productive to examine a few of the major characters, paying close attention to the pressures they suffer, the forces that are exerted on them and by them, the relationships they make, and all the intricacies of their complicated inner lives. Sometimes the problems of one character, for instance, affect the other characters. Sometimes the emotional conflicts of one character affect another.

One thing you’ll begin to notice with your readers is that even as a character seems to solve one problem, another arises. Or the original problem turns out to have many parts. Basically, the plotlines begin to multiply in these novels, within the book and across the series. One way readers keep track of the characters, problems, and storylines is we use charts, timelines, and other graphic organizers. You may want to teach your readers, therefore, that alert readers often use a pencil as we read, so that we can jot lists of characters, timelines, maps, and so forth. You can model this work through your read-aloud text, for which you and your students will probably create some of these learning tools. You can also have a teaching share, where club members leave open their notebooks to a favorite page, and then students do a gallery walk looking at what other readers have done for ideas for how they, too, might use their pencil effectively and swiftly as they read, aligning with the Common Core State Standards.

## **Part Two: Developing Thematic Understanding: It’s about More Than Dwarfs and Elves**

---

You might begin this part of the unit by showing an image from an old map that includes that famous term “Here Be Dragons,” such as The Carta Marina. There are zillions of images online, such as sea monsters attacking ships in places the mariners considered dangerous. The Lenox Globe, of which there are also zillions of online images, was the first map to include the phrase “Here Be Dragons.” You might explain to your students how this phrase, and these maps, show how early mapmakers were depicting their literal understanding of the world, as well as their metaphoric understanding that it was dangerous. “Here Be Dragons” symbolized the host of unknown

dangers that travelers might encounter. Or you might return to *The Paper Bag Princess*, to reconsider Elizabeth's conflicts. The first one is an actual dragon, but then it turns out that Ronald's brutality is a conflict too—in fact, it's one of her dragons. Specifically, teach your students that some of the dragons that characters face are metaphoric dragons. One way readers explore these “dragons” is to consider the inner struggles that characters face. These are the conflicts inside a character's soul, which haunt that character. You might encourage book clubs to think about the “dragons” in their own lives, as well as the lives of their characters. After all, one reason we participate in book clubs is so that we come to know each other better through the books that we read.

From thinking about the “dragons” that characters face, you can then move to teaching students that readers ask ourselves: “What is this story *really* about?” We realize that there are underlying themes and life-lessons in the stories we are reading. Turn to your read-aloud book, and you may also discuss some of the underlying themes of popular fantasy stories such as Harry Potter, the Narnia books, and *The Lord of the Rings*. You might, for instance, describe how fantasy readers know that *The Lord of the Rings* isn't just about hobbits and elves. This story is about the struggle between good and evil. It's about how power slowly eats away and corrupts. And it's about how the physically strong can use their gifts to protect others. This story is about how even the smallest and physically weakest can find moral strength to defeat evil. It's about love and how love drives us to be better than we are. This story—and other fantasy stories, too—encompasses all of these complex, essential themes. That's why we read these stories! Teach your readers that in their clubs, they can move from retelling what happens in their books to investigating the underlying themes that the story seems to suggest. They'll begin to see that stories are about more than one idea and that ideas run across multiple stories—which is how you'll know that your readers are developing thematic understanding.

As your readers begin to recognize the struggles between good and evil in their novels, you can teach them about the internal struggle for good and evil that many characters suffer. One thing that happens in fantasy novels, which is unusual for children's fiction, is that characters are sometimes unpredictable, or even deceptive, because they struggle between good and evil. Luke, in *The Lightning Thief*, turns out to be trouble despite his charming persona. Snape, in the Harry Potter series, turns out to be heroic despite his nasty personality. Teach your readers that characters are complicated—they are usually more than one way—and experienced readers, knowing this, are alert for the character flaws in the hero and the admirable traits in the villain.

### **Part Three: Literary Traditions, Including Archetypes, Quest Structures, and Thematic Patterns**

---

Just before Book Six of Harry Potter was released—*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*—there was a lot of press about it. Someone from the publisher had leaked that

a major character would die in the novel. Fans everywhere met and surmised who it would be. Would it be Ron, Harry's volatile best friend? Would it be Hagrid, the loyal gamekeeper at Hogwarts? Would it be malevolent Professor Snape, who detests Harry? Avid young fantasy readers, though, were convinced that it would be Dumbledore who would die. They reasoned that Dumbledore had to die because he's the mentor, and the mentor has to die so the hero can come of age. They were right. They understood about archetypes and narrative structures. As your readers accumulate fantasy novels, teach them to compare characters, especially the role that characters play in the story. Experienced fantasy readers come to recognize that types of characters appear in more than one story. We also see a recurring story structure of a quest narrative. And we see themes that occur across stories. Teach your students that an understanding of story structure, character roles, and themes deepens readers' analysis and extends readers' literary conversations. As you do all this work, you'll be supporting the new Common Core State Standards' work in teaching students how novels are grounded in particular literary traditions.

To look more closely, you might examine the quest structure in your read-aloud texts and the stories the clubs are reading. Most fantasy stories follow a quest narrative structure. This means that the hero is given a quest, which means he or she must journey to achieve something. Sometimes the quest involves rescuing a captive or a sacred object, as with *Shrek* or *Sinbad*. Other times the quest may require the hero to destroy a villain or a dangerous object, as with *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. A third common quest narrative is one in which the hero has entered another world or place and must now find a way out; the quest is the journey out of there, as with *Alice in Wonderland*.

Another predictable aspect of fantasy novels is that the characters often play expected roles in the story. Teach your readers that the main character is usually the hero of the story. But common hero types include the *traditional* hero, such as Prince Caspian; the *reluctant*, or everyday hero, the ordinary person who finds herself swept into great events, such as *Harry Potter*; and the *anti-hero*, who usually has several nonheroic traits. She may cheat or lie or steal or be cruel. Yet she plays a heroic part in the drama. Snape is that kind of antihero, as is *Sinbad*. Other common character roles in fantasy include the mentor, who teaches and guides the young hero; the companions, who usually accompany the hero on the quest; and the villain, who is often disguised and can even appear to some to be benevolent, like the Queen in *Narnia*. And there is often a consort, who is the love interest of the hero, if the story is one that has a romantic aspect. Your readers will see that these characters often have many similarities across fantasy stories. It's common for one of the companions to be jealous and volatile for instance. It's common for the mentor to perish before the hero comes of age. It's common for the villain to have many guises. It's common for the hero to be uncertain of his or her powers. In this way, the characters in fantasy stories are not just their individual selves. They are also archetypes, which is what we call characters that are standard in stories. And it's fascinating to analyze characters this way. You don't have to do so to read fantasy. You don't have to do this work to love the characters. But

it does move you to an even deeper level of comprehension. You might, therefore, teach your readers this work as an added dimension to studying characters.

Finally, you might want to encourage your readers to reexamine the themes in their books, thinking across texts. One common aspect of fantasy stories is that they are almost always about the epic struggle between good and evil, and in fantasy, by the end, good triumphs. In this way, fantasy stories are moral triumphs. They preach that people are inherently good. They demonstrate that the struggle against injustice is worth it, no matter how arduous the journey is. A common theme in these fantasy novels, though, is that the character has to overcome internal struggles and embrace his or her essential goodness for good to triumph for all. Self-sacrifice, thus, is one of the most important themes in fantasy. The hero must put himself or herself in danger's way. That's one reason these stories are so inspiring. Your readers will begin to see why these stories are so stirring as they begin to recognize recurring themes and literary traditions.

There is one more lens that you might want to teach your readers to put on as they move forward with fantasy reading: to read with critical lenses. You might want to begin by showing images of Disney characters, such as the Little Mermaid, Cinderella, and so forth. It doesn't take long to see that all these characters get to be brave and strong, but they all also have to be beautiful. Only beautiful girls get to be heroines in Disney. Then, teach your students that one way readers analyze stories is with critical lenses, being alert to stereotypes and gender norms. You might look at how Erica, the cross-dressing-under-cover-female-dragon-slayer in *Dragon Slayers' Academy*, breaks out of girl stereotypes as wanting to wear dresses and play with dolls. You might recall Annabeth from *The Lightning Thief* and her fierceness. You may teach your readers that we can analyze a character by his or her appearance and his or her actions. Readers ask ourselves, "Does this character fit with common stereotypes?"

Finally, you'll want to be sure to make time at the end of the unit for readers to reflect on what reading practices they've honed in reading fantasy that they can use in other genres. Hopefully your readers have come to love series, they've learned to seek books avidly, they've practiced preparing for book club conversations, they've learned to investigate complicated characters and track multiple plotlines, and they've developed thematic understandings across texts. All of this reading work will pay off in other genres! Lots of characters in realistic fiction, for instance, have "dragons." Many face more than one problem. Characters in realistic and historical fiction often go on quests, face obstacles, learn how to be strong, and turn out to be reluctant heroes. So teach your readers that we make opportunities to reflect on our work and make plans for how to incorporate and extend it. Some of your readers might want to continue their book clubs. Some might want to keep reading fantasy. Some may consciously incorporate these reading practices into other genres. This would be a good time for readers to reflect in their notebooks and to plot the trajectory of their reading lives.



### Some Titles that May Be Useful in This Study

The Werewolf Club series	(L)	Daniel Pinkwater
Unicorn's Secret series	(M)	Kathleen Duey
Secrets of Droon	(M/O)	Tony Abbott
Dragon Slayers' Academy	(N/P)	Kate McMullan
Spiderwick Chronicles	(O/R)	Holly Black and Tony DiTerlizzi
The Edge Chronicles	(R/U)	Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell
City of Ember series	(R/U)	Jeanne DuPrau
Deltora Quest	(R/T)	Emily Rodda
Warriors	(R/S)	Erin Hunter
Narnia series	(T)	C. S. Lewis
<i>Rowan of Rin</i>	(T)	Emily Rodda
Animorphs	(T/U)	K. A. Applegate
The Ranger's Apprentice	(T/U)	John Flanagan
<i>Gregor the Overlander</i>	(U/V)	Suzanne Collins
<i>Artemis Fowl</i>	(W)	Eoin Colfer
<i>Tuck Everlasting</i>	(W)	Natalie Babbitt
Percy Jackson and the Olympians	(U/W)	Rick Riordan
<i>The Dark Is Rising</i>	(X)	Susan Cooper
Mockingjay series (The Hunger Games)	(Y/Z)	Suzanne Collins
Redwall series	(X/Z)	Brian Jacques
Harry Potter series	(V/Z)	J. K. Rowling
<i>The Golden Compass</i>	(Y/Z)	Phillip Pullman

### Additional Resources

As you approach this unit, it will be important for you to read the entire write-up, not just the teaching points below, because ultimately kids learn through the work they do, not the words out of your mouth. So the really important thing in a unit of study is that you have created opportunities for kids to engage in work that matters. The unit write-up can help you issue the wide, generous invitation that rallies kids not only to work with heart and soul but to also engage in deliberate practice, trying to get better at specific skills that the unit aims to highlight. But in the end, a good portion of your teaching will revolve around the responsive instruction you provide as you move kids along trajectories of skill development. This part of your teaching relies on you assessing your students often—not in big fancy ways, but by watching the work they do—and you seeing their work as feedback on your teaching. If you have taught something and only a handful of kids are able to do that work to good effect, then you'll want to decide whether that skill was essential, whether you want to reteach it in a new way, or whether you want to detour around it. You'll want to become accustomed to fine-tuning your teaching through an attentiveness to student work, because the work your students do is not just showing you what they *can* do and *can't* do; it is also showing you what *you* can do. From this attentiveness to student work and from your own persistence to reach students, one way or another, and your

inventiveness in response to what they do, you'll find that your teaching itself becomes a course of study for you as well as for your students. Note that the below teaching points represent just one possible way among many that this unit could go.

**Teaching Points from *A Quick Guide to Teaching Fantasy: Epic Novels for Epic Readers*, by Mary Ehrenworth (Heinemann 2011)  
re-edited from "Learning from the Elves," in *Constructing Curriculum, in Units of Study for Teaching Reading*  
(Heinemann 2010)**

---

**Part One: Constructing, Navigating, and Managing Other Worlds**

- "Friends, today I want to teach you that fantasy readers understand that their first task is to figure out what kind of setting their story takes place in. Readers look for clues about the time period and the magical elements, in particular, using the covers, blurbs, and details from the beginning of the story for their research. We know that the setting will have physical and psychological implications on the character and the story."
- "Readers, today I want to teach you that in complicated stories such as these fantasy novels, often the main characters begin without a lot of knowledge, and they have a steep learning curve. When the main character is told important information or has dramatic new experiences, alert readers see those moments in the story as opportunities not just for the character to learn but for the reader to learn hand-in-hand with the main character."
- "Friends, as readers tackle more complicated books, the stories will begin to have multiple plotlines. This means that the main characters will have more than one problem, that problems will arise for other characters, and that not all problems will be resolved by the end of a story. Today I want to teach you that often readers find it helpful to use charts, timelines, and other graphic organizers to track the problems that arise in a story, to closely follow the multiple plotlines, and to gather evidence sort of the way scientists do, in charts and tables that let us do close analysis."
- "Readers, today I want to teach you that experienced readers have a repertoire of writing-about-reading strategies that we mine to support our reading work and our conversations. These include making visuals, sorting and analyzing Post-its and entries, experimenting with charts and flowcharts, and writing reflections. One way to extend this repertoire is for a learning community to share with each other the different ways that we use our notebooks as we read."

## **Part Two: It's about More Than Dwarves and Elves**

- “Readers, today I want to teach you that in the stories you are reading, the characters face dragons as well. Not just literal dragons, which some fantasy characters do encounter, but metaphoric dragons—these are the conflicts inside a character’s soul, which haunt that character. Powerful readers learn to think metaphorically about these ‘dragons.’”
- “Readers, today I want to teach you that often, with great stories, the plot is a vehicle for teaching about ideas. The stories are not just about what happens. Stories are also about themes and life-lessons. Insightful readers mine these stories for these themes and lessons.”
- “Readers, today I want to teach you that as the books we read become more complex, the characters also become more complicated. They are not just all evil or all good—they are nuanced. This means that powerful readers delve deeply into their characters’ strengths, flaws, and motivations across the whole arc of the story.”

## **Part Three: Literary Traditions**

- “Friends, today I want to teach you that fantasy novels have certain characteristics, or patterns in their structures and the character roles. One way that experienced fantasy readers analyze the stories they read, therefore, is they consider the patterns that emerge in story structure, character roles, and themes—these are part of the literary traditions of this genre.”
- “Readers, today I want to teach you that one way readers analyze a story is to read with critical lenses for stereotypes and gender norms (or rules). One way to do this work is to consider characters’ actions and appearances.”
- “Today I want to teach you that when readers have been deeply studying a genre, they may incorporate and extend this work. Some ways to do this include using the strategies they have sharpened in other genres; seeking more books, and company, to become even more expert in this genre; or moving to other genres that are similar this one.”



## UNIT SIX

# Interpretation Text Sets

**FEBRUARY/MARCH**

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: T/U)

**W**e could not agree more with the Common Core State Standards' recommendation that we teach readers at this level to determine central ideas or themes of a text as well as analyze the development of these themes. By now, your students have already been doing some interpretation, of course. They have interpreted the motivations for characters' actions and feelings, and they have constructed theories about events, places, and people in their novels. In this unit of study, you will sharpen your students' analytical skills even further, teaching them to study texts deeply to grow big ideas as they read. In this unit, you'll help your readers to sharpen their analytical skills as you teach them that the stories they are reading are also about ideas. You'll move your students to think and talk about the ideas their chapter books suggest. Then you'll show them, pretty much immediately, that good books are about more than one idea, and you'll teach them to keep more than one idea afloat in their minds. All the time, you will be training your students to be analytical and persuasive as you teach them to back up their ideas with evidence from the texts. Pretty early on in the unit, you'll teach your readers that just as their books are about more than one idea, ideas live in more than one book—we call those ideas *themes*. Once your students are recognizing themes, you'll teach them to compare how themes are developed in different texts. You'll have them hone their reading and the ideas they are growing as they read to be more nuanced, deliberate, and finely calibrated.

You'll know your students are ready for this teaching if, as you look over their Post-its and listen to their partner conversations, you see that they are regularly inferring about the characters in their stories and are synthesizing the narrative elements in the

stories they read. If, for instance, a student is reading *Because of Winn-Dixie* and has no trouble keeping track of the characters, figuring out where the story is taking place, and understanding the nature of the town at the beginning and end of the story, that student is ready to also realize that *Because of Winn-Dixie* is the kind of novel that suggests important themes—it's a book that teaches us how to live. If, on the other hand, when you talk to that same student about *Because of Winn-Dixie*, he or she seems to talk only about what is happening right now in the book, without connecting that action to earlier events, and as you check in with another student, you see that same reading-for-plot-and-constantly-surprised-by-the-plot kind of reading, then you may want to turn to Unit Two: "Following Characters into Meaning" in this curricular calendar or in the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading* 3–5. This interpretation unit makes the most sense for readers who are reading books, at minimum, at level P and above and who are regularly inferring about the characters' emotions, traits, and changes in their books. Ideally, the bulk of your readers will be level T and above when you embark on this unit.

## Unit Overview

---

The unit has three main parts, each one leading students toward increasingly more nuanced thinking, while also leading students in steps, so that they can do the work independently, not merely follow their teacher's thinking. It's an easy job to tell young readers what the ideas are in a novel. It's easy to tell them a theme and have them find evidence for that theme in a text. It's easy, that is, to hand over a piece of literature as content to your students and have them hunt and peck for answers to questions you devise. It is much more challenging to teach young people to think for themselves and to be dissatisfied with easy, literal, undisputed reading and thinking. They'll need some specific strategy instruction in analytical reading practices, or else they will remain ever dependent on collaborative, teacher-led, coauthored understandings.

Part One begins with students revisiting familiar texts, thinking about the ideas these texts suggest. You'll teach students to reconsider and "reread" prior events and texts. You'll teach them that stories are never about just one idea, showing them that the way that the Common Core State Standards analyze nonfiction texts, for more than one idea, is also relevant for fiction. And then pretty quickly, you'll show your readers that ideas live in more than one text. In Part Two, you'll move students to more nuanced reading and thinking, by teaching them to lay texts that are united thematically alongside of each other and really investigate how an author develops a theme. Rarely are the settings, characters, or events exactly matched, and it is in these fine details that students, with your instruction, will learn to illuminate complexity, really analyzing how ideas that at first glance appear the same may be different either in their development or in their details. Imagine how this thinking will help your students in later life, as they learn to ask colleagues, leaders, and co-citizens,

“Wait, I think that these ideas are similar, but somewhat different in their implications or applications.”

Finally, in Part Three, you’ll offer your students analytical lenses for interpretation that focus on symbolism and literary craft, so that students are alert to the metaphors in the texts that they encounter. This ability to think metaphorically enriches students’ experience of literature, it hones their thinking in new directions, and it will enhance their own language and expressiveness. Your students will emerge from this unit more alert to the metaphoric allusions and rhetoric in the texts they encounter, whether it is the idea that the dog is a pivotal character in *Because of Winn-Dixie* or that the suitcase is more than a suitcase in *Tiger Rising*.

## Getting Started: Preparing Your Classroom Library

---

This unit will not require any special new texts. Universal ideas (i.e., literary themes) are universal because they are important in a great many stories. You will not need specially constructed text sets for readers to think about how different authors convey the same theme. So you don’t have to make a basket of books labeled “struggle against nature” and fill it with *Skylark*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *Out of the Dust*. The unit is going to lead students to do much more intellectual work than simply find evidence of a prenamed theme. Your students will, though, want to do this work collaboratively, in partnerships and small clubs—so you and they should gather texts of which you have multiple copies. They’ll range back over the fantasy and historic fiction you had already gathered for club units. Some students may reread these books, with more comparative thinking, during this unit. Others of your readers should be at higher reading levels now than when you were in those units of study, and so they can reach for harder texts.

You may, though, make it easier to tackle this work by having copies available of your prior read-aloud texts, by gathering some baskets of poetry and nonfiction that students may investigate if they become preoccupied with certain themes, and of course, by having at hand as many rich, dense chapter books at appropriate levels as possible for each reader. Students simply can’t do the higher-level work of the Common Core State Standards if they are reading one text and thinking about that text in isolation. During the reading workshop, members of a book club will read books together—say, for example, four students will read *Hatchet*. Within a week of the start of this unit, you’ll be encouraging readers to make connections between the one book that they are reading—in this instance, *Hatchet*—and other books the class has read. How is *Hatchet* like (and unlike) *My Side of the Mountain*? How is it like (and unlike) *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*? Readers will create their own text sets by looking across books they’ve read and plan to read and finding ones that address similar themes.

Check that your lower-level readers have access to books that they can read that are just difficult enough for them to be striving and achieving while still being within what they can actually read. It’s often easier to do analytical thinking, in higher-level



texts, because the texts themselves are so complex. So make sure that you've gathered narratives that are as suggestive and complicated as possible for your lower-level readers. *Dragon Slayers' Academy*, for instance, at levels N/O, offers wild complexities and provocative themes, whereas it may be hard (but not impossible) to develop thematic understanding in *Magic Treehouse*. They are both terrific series, but you may highlight one over the other in this unit of study. Look over your library with that lens, and imagine yourself doing the work of this unit in the books that are available.

It will be important for your class to have a set of shared texts to mine in this unit—and presumably those will be the books and short texts (picture books) you have read aloud all year, combined with books that students know from previous years. If you have not done much reading aloud and your class does not have a shared repertoire of texts, then begin reading aloud now!

As with any unit, teachers need to first decide upon the skills that will be forwarded. We recommend using the performance assessment aligned to the curricular calendar to glimpse what your kids can do with analyzing across two texts and articulating their ideas about texts in writing, with substantive evidence gathered and cited from the texts. Chances are very good that all your students need considerable help with these skills, in which case, you will be wise to teach this unit with a lot of heft, using your small groups and individual conferring and book clubs as forums for supporting your students' progress toward being able to read analytically.

Once students can see that texts often address the same theme, then you can help students notice differences in nuance of the message or in each author's treatment of the message. Students will be able to contrast how authors present or develop a meaning, theme, or character—first in conversation and then in writing. Meanwhile, you can teach a parallel unit in the writing workshop on writing literary essays, using some of the reading workshop (as well as other short-text work) as grist for their writing mills.

## Part One: Considering the Implications of Stories

---

To begin the unit, you'll offer your students an invitation to interpretation work, teaching them that events in our lives are open to analysis, just as events and characters in books will be. You'll teach all your students how to return to critical moments in their lives and learn more from those moments. The unit begins with what the Common Core State Standards suggest are the "applications" of more complex thinking—the ability to analyze any experience. Students will have an opportunity to revisit moments in their lives and then to revisit favorite texts. Then they'll quickly move to other texts, while their interpretive zeal is strong.

The goal of the first two days is to give kids (and ourselves) lots of repeated practice interpreting so that over the two days, everyone becomes fluent with this sort of thinking, more aware of text interpretations that exist out there in the world and more accustomed to speaking in this analytical, idea-based "language." We also want kids

to realize that they are interpreting all the time and that any one event or story can have lots of different interpretations. An important thing to realize is that sometimes we have taught interpretation as the One Big Idea that a text teaches, channeling kids to think about this only when they are two-thirds of the way through a text or done with it or after a teacher has suggested an idea, thus channeling them toward the interpretation that we have decided is the best one. The problem is that when we do this, we put interpretation on a high-up shelf, out of reach from kids' sticky fingers—and we take away the thinking work, leaving kids in the role of miners looking for diamonds that will belong to someone else. As a result, lots of kids (and frankly, lots of teachers) feel uncomfortable with the “correctness” of their own interpretation. There is a feeling that this is literary criticism and we are not sure we're entitled to have a go at it, when in fact, any interpretation, just like any text, is open to debate and needs to be validated, examined, and justified.

So this part of the unit aims to reverse or avoid that damage, helping kids know that interpretation is what thoughtful people do all throughout our lives, and it is within grasp of us all. By inviting kids to feel at home interpreting, we expect they'll become accustomed to this way of thinking and this way of talking about texts, and their interpretations will get far better just from immersion. So please, during this first part of the unit, issue a generous invitation to kids, welcome much of what they say, don't get bent out of shape by what may seem like shallow interpretations, and know that your students' room for growth stems largely from unfamiliarity with doing this work independently.

First, you may teach a lesson that begins in your life and then moves to familiar stories. You'll tell your readers that good readers don't read just to find out what characters do or what happens in stories. Powerful readers also realize that the stories we read are about ideas—they literally teach us how to live. Then you'll invite your students to first consider how, in their own lives, there have been experiences that have taught life-lessons. You'll probably want to model on a real-life story that seems significant in your own life—perhaps one that you have already modeled with in writing workshop. Right from the start, then, you'll be teaching that we're not searching for one idea, but that analytical thinkers develop ideas about events and experiences.

In the same session, you can have your readers revisit the narratives they've written in their writer's notebooks and analyze them for ideas or life-lessons they see in them. Then they can turn to the stories they've read and talk with a partner or club members, sharing their ideas about stories they've read this year so far. Coach into how kids support their ideas with evidence, and teach them to listen closely to each other and to add on to the ideas that are brought up, so that they build a cornucopia of ideas together. If this teaching seems like too much for one lesson, you could break it into two lessons—the first where you teach students that moments in our lives are open to interpretation, and you and your students reconsider real-life moments for the ideas or life-lessons they suggest, and a second lesson where you teach that moments in books also teach life-lessons, and you and your students reconsider favorite stories you've read so far this year.

For homework, you might invite students to do this same work on the television programs they watch or the books they are reading on their own or the events that happen in their days. Students will love the invitation to watch a TV show, each of them, thinking, “What does this character learn? What can the character teach?” You can help students ask this question using other phrases or terms as well, which is a wise thing to do because eventually standardized tests will ask them this same question, and there are a lot of different ways to work the question. Alternately, students could be invited to think about the people in their families who are always drawing life-lessons from things that happen. Perhaps it is a grandparent who comes from an event saying, “See what I mean? I always tell you—families have to stick together.” That’s interpretation.

If your kids have a lot of trouble interpreting, you will want to do a lot more work reading aloud and show them how you begin to think interpretively. We recommend you watch Kathleen Tolan’s work with *The Giving Tree* on the DVD that accompanies *Units of Study for Reading* and watch the active moves Kathleen makes as she demonstrates and supports kids to move from reading actively to reading interpretively. Notice that she slows down the process of thinking interpretively, saying, “Hmmm . . . I’m just wondering . . . what *could* this be teaching me? Hmmm . . . I’m thinking about. . .” (Then she recalls, rereads.) “What *could* that mean? Could it maybe mean. . . ? Or could it mean. . . ?” You can do similar work, stretching out and slowing down the process of interpreting so that kids begin to climb up on their knees, saying, “I know! I got an idea!” And then, if their ideas are not particularly strong, try to accept them anyhow, listen to them, and find better ideas within those flawed ones.

In your next lesson, you may turn your readers to pivotal moments in stories, showing them how to pay attention to moments in stories when characters experience strong emotions and/or make critical choices. These moments are also ones where readers have an opportunity to learn from the decisions characters make. Again, you’ll reteach that at each of these moments in a story, readers can make more than one interpretation and construct more than one idea that may turn out to be significant. You’ll want to alert your readers, as well, to how powerful readers remain open as they keep moving through a book, seeing how their ideas play out. Probably, you’ll demonstrate this work on a read-aloud text that is familiar to your kids, so your students will probably also want to return to favorite texts. There is value in giving students opportunities to reread texts, and here they’ll have a chance to revisit favorites, thumbing through the pages for remembered moments, reconsidering those more analytically, jotting down ideas those parts suggest, and then arguing and defending those ideas with their partners and club members. As readers talk to each other, teach them to listen carefully not for if they agree with an idea but if the author of that idea justifies it well—that is, do your readers assemble textual evidence for their arguments?

In what’s probably lesson three, you may find it helpful to begin with a chart that students coauthor of the ideas and lessons that students are gathering from their revisiting of prior stories. Immediately, students will begin to see that just as stories

are about more than one idea, an idea may also appear in more than one story. This, you may explain to them if they do not know already, is the notion of *theme*—an idea that appears in more than one story. If your students have already been in the historical fiction unit of study described in this calendar and in *Tackling Complex Texts* of the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*, then they have bridged themes across texts before. If that's the case, then make this lesson one in which you remind them that readers call on their prior reading practices, such as being alert to how more than one text may suggest similar themes. If that seems fuzzy to your readers, then use your chart to visibly articulate themes that seem as if they appear in more than one of your read-alouds. The idea, for instance, that even a child may make a tremendous difference in a community is suggested by *Because of Winn-Dixie*. It is also suggested by *The Other Side* and *Harry Potter*. Demystifying “theme” so that young readers can analyze texts for their thematic implications themselves, rather than awaiting a sacrosanct, preconceived theme, may be among the most important, and early, work that happens in this unit of study. In later years, when one of your students is “told” what the theme of a novel is, that young intellectual will probably say, “Perhaps, though I also see other possibilities such as. . . .” In the same manner, your students will need to be convinced, with evidence, of the integrity of ideas that they are presented with. Reading is how we train our minds.

It may also be helpful to chart some phrases readers sometimes use when they are talking about interpretations, such as:

When I first read this story, I thought it was just about . . . but now that I think deeper about it, I realize that really, it is also about. . . .

Often people . . . but this story shows that it's possible people should. . . .

I used to think . . . but now after reading this I think . . . because. . . .

I learned from (the character, the event) that in life, it can be important to. . . .

This story teaches us not only about . . . but also about. . . .

As students engage in this work, coach into their work by showing them that they always need to support their ideas with evidence from the text. If they select passages from the text that seem tangentially related to the main idea, then say, “Does the connection between that and your idea hit you over the head, seem totally obvious, or is it a bit hard to see? If it is not hit-you-over-the-head obvious, usually it helps to think of another example from the text or to say more about why this example seems so relevant. Perhaps your idea is more complicated than you thought at first.”

So far, students have been analyzing stories they have lived and stories they have already read. For the following lessons, club members need to be in new books, so have them choose a book at the end of this session, if they haven't done so already, and get started reading it for homework.

Because your students have been revisiting familiar texts, they'll mostly be thinking *after* they've finished the book. Now, in what's probably lesson four, you'll want to teach your readers that we don't wait until we're done with a book to begin constructing ideas and designing reading plans to investigate these ideas. You may want to go to your current read-aloud text and talk about some of the ideas the text is suggesting so far. Teach your readers to jot these down, to substantiate them by giving a little boxes-and-bullets speech to club members, and to be ready to read on, gathering evidence for these ideas. Then give them an opportunity to do the same work in their own books. Remind them that good books are about more than one idea as well, so teach them to follow more than one idea as they go forward.

Finally, in lesson five, you'll want to teach your students that powerful readers revise our ideas as we keep reading. Show them how sometimes ideas develop into more complicated ideas. Sometimes ideas we had about a text, as we keep reading, simply are no longer true—the text diverges and the story suggests alternative ideas, so readers have to remain flexible and alert. And sometimes ideas that seemed important come to seem smaller next to more significant ideas. What's important is that your readers remain alert and responsive and that they expect to keep validating their ideas and revising them. You might show students that at first *Because of Winn-Dixie* seems to be the story of a lonely girl who makes friends with a dog—teaching us, perhaps, that a dog can be a best friend. But then the story takes a new turn, and it tells about how Opal's relationship with her dog seems to change her relationship with her father, leading one to think that the story may be about how learning to love a dog can help people learn to love people, too. Readers can learn to talk about how the book's message unfolds over time by saying, "First when I started to read this, I thought that deep down, it was maybe about . . . but now as I read on, I'm finding that it is also about. . . ."

For example, if you were to read aloud *The Tiger Rising*, you might find yourself thinking aloud when Rob makes the choice to save Sistine from the group of kids who are beating her up at lunch. You might say, "Wow, Rob really surprised me by standing up for Sistine and saving her from that gang of kids. This is such a contrast to Rob who, up until this point, has shown us that he has become an expert at 'not-thinking' about anything that bothers him. Remember how earlier in the story, Rob's 'not-thinking' strategy made us grow some ideas about how a really terrible loss, like Rob losing his mom, can make people shut down? And some of us even wondered if shutting down, like Rob does, is just something that grieving people have to do to protect themselves from all the hurt. Well, after watching Rob take on Sistine's attackers and then sit with her on the bus, my thinking is starting to change a bit. Rob may be good at shutting down his feelings about everything and everyone, but I realize it's not really working for him. Rob enjoys the 'thrill' of saving Sistine, but then he's terrified of talking to her, of letting his feelings show. Maybe this story is beginning to be more about how after a terrible loss, somehow people have to learn to trust again and to let themselves grow close to others. We'll have to see if and how Rob does that."



## Part Two: Themes May Be the Same across Books, but They're Usually Developed Differently

---

You'll probably notice that your readers eagerly jumped in to show that an idea that is true in one text may be true in another. In fact, you can expect that they'll begin to see themes everywhere and that they'll lapse into cliché, or even into proverbs, that they'll overstate and simplify. Donna Santman, author of *Shades of Meaning: Teaching Comprehension and Interpretation*, reminds us that what is cliché to us as adults is remarkably original to a young reader. So you have to keep your face straight and be impressed when they notice that *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* and *The Other Side* both show that it's okay to be different! "It takes all kinds," as my grandmother says, one student will say. Then her club will apply that idea to all their texts eagerly. That said, our next job will be to teach students the Common Core State Standards work of analyzing *how* a text makes a theme visible—how that theme is developed, where and how you see it becoming more visible in the text, and how that development is undoubtedly different in different texts. Oliver Button and Clover from *The Other Side* are not, in fact, the same in every way. They are similar in how they tackle trouble with fortitude. They are similar in how they hold onto their dreams. They are similar in how they are lonely. But they are dissimilar in many other ways. Oliver tackles differences in gender expectations, whereas Clover tackles the color line. Oliver acts alone, whereas Clover carries others into her scheme. The time, the place, the characters, and the kind of trouble they face, are different.

In lesson one of this part, therefore, you'll praise your readers for noticing how themes live in more than one text, and you'll study the classroom charts that document these themes intently, perhaps holding up some of your read-aloud texts as you demonstrate. "You know," you may say, "I'm realizing that while some of these stories have the same theme, there's also a lot of differences in these stories. It seems to me that it would be fascinating to investigate what's *different* about stories that have the same theme. I know that when I think *people* are the same, it turns out that I can usually learn a lot from how we're different as well. For instance, I'm drawn to Dylan because he's such an avid reader—he's a lot like me. But he reads different kinds of books, and now I've learned to love a lot of those books too. Or Sarah and I share a love for the kings of England—but she loves the modern ones and I love the historical ones, so we learn a lot from each other when we pore over what's different in our knowledge. I'm thinking, for instance, of how we said, when we studied historical fiction, that a lot of our stories showed that war makes kids grow up fast. And that's true. But the war that Annemarie endures in *Number the Stars* is really different than the one that Ishmael Beah suffers in *Long Way Gone*, which I've been reading. In *Number the Stars*, the war came somewhat slowly to Annemarie, and she changed rapidly for a child, but she still had time to make sense of what was happening around her. She grew up fast, but she could do it. Whereas in *Long Way Gone*, the war comes overnight to Ishmael's village, and it all happens at such a rapid-fire pace that it's almost as if he can't grow fast enough—there's no way to make sense of what is



happening. All this is making me realize that it will be worth studying what's *different* in stories that are linked thematically and seeing what it makes us realize. One way to study those differences is to study what's different about the setting."

You may need a lesson on some of the practicalities that help readers study and compare texts. Your readers, now, will continue to read the books they are choosing for their clubs, but they'll analyze and talk about those books in the context of other books they've read before, putting ones alongside each other that they think are related and learning now to analyze the nuances in how these stories are different as well as similar. There is more on support for clubs, for how they choose their books, for how they interact with each other, and for how they document their work, below. It may be helpful to have a student-made chart up with the titles, characters, places, and themes or issues that occur in your read-aloud texts from this year and old favorites that your class remembers. Or make color copies of the covers and hang them on the bulletin board—any kind of visible reminder helps students recall earlier texts and work with them. You can also demonstrate how to leaf through the pages of your reader's notebook, if your kids are keeping them, reminding yourself of earlier books you've read and of ideas you had in those books. And just as when you showed your students how to revisit their writer's notebooks to see new ideas in old stories, you can show them how, as you revisit and remind yourself of stories you read before, in the light of your new thinking, you have new understandings and insight.

In your third lesson of this part, you'll teach your students that just as we can study how the settings of stories that share themes are usually different, and that difference has implications for how the theme develops in the story, there are usually differences also in the characters—in their backgrounds, their perspectives and points of views, and their traits. If you examine how Oliver Button responds to trouble, for instance, in *Oliver Button Is a Sissy*, he is quiet, almost silent, about his determination. He acts in open defiance of his father's urge that he play "any kind of ball"—but he does it not by arguing, but by asking for something different—dance lessons. He doesn't ask for help when the boys bully him. He forges quietly ahead, and it is his silent fortitude that wins over some in his community, such as his father. Clover, on the other hand, also wants to be different. She too doesn't believe the same things her mother does. So both books share a similar theme (and probably several themes) that kids don't always believe the same things as their parents. But the characters show those beliefs somewhat differently. Neither child speaks in defiance, but Clover immediately enlists other children into her actions. She assumes that kids share beliefs, and in fact, the children she meets rise to those expectations, whereas Oliver is teased and bullied by his peers.

Expect that your readers will *like* to study texts deeply and to engage in intellectual work—and you'll find that they enjoy analyzing and arguing the nuances of how their stories are different. And all the time, they are training their minds. The same kind of thinking that allows lawyers to prepare defenses and researchers to create new vaccines is this paying attention to detail, poring over material, and honing ideas with intellectual zeal.

If your students need more support with finding places in their texts where characters demonstrate how they help develop a theme in similar and different ways, point them to the moments in their narratives when characters face trouble, and coach them to analyze how characters respond to trouble. You may want, especially if your students are engaged in the parallel writing workshop unit, “Interpretive Essays,” to remind them that one reason we read is not just to study themes as an intellectual exercise, but to learn how to live from the characters in stories. Bronwyn Davies, the great gender researcher, writes that children learn about possibility from the stories they encounter in school. Teach your students, thus, that readers draw conclusions about characters’ traits from how they respond to trouble and then teach them to compare those traits with their own. Teach them that our characters, like our ideas, are revisable—we can at any moment choose to try to respond differently, to be different. Our own selves are a constant process of revision.

In what’s probably your fifth lesson of this part of the unit, you’ll teach a repertoire lesson—that is, rather than laying out a new strategy, you’ll show your students how they have increased their repertoire of reading practices, and you’ll show them how to access that repertoire with fluency and delight. So you may teach your students that, just as a basketball player who has been practicing dribbling and throwing drills finds in a game that he or she does all that work automatically, while simultaneously processing who is where on the court, the amount of time left in the quarter, and where the ball is going, a reader takes on all the parts of the story as it comes in, now with increased alertness and expertise and thus increased responsiveness. For example, we begin to ask ourselves early on, “What is this story beginning to be *about*?” We begin to track ideas; we collect moments along the way that support those ideas; we recall other stories we’ve read, and we think and talk about how the story we are reading compares to those; we weigh our own lives and decisions with those characters make; we have epiphanies where we are struck with possible life-lessons that books leave us with. Moreover, as the books we read get more complicated, things are not always what they seem. Characters who appeared trustworthy may not be, and thus their relationship to themes and lessons they demonstrate will shift. Any reader of Harry Potter knows this. But with our training, we are that basketball player, weaving with grace and power through complicated courts of deception, ruse, and opposition.

### **Part Three: Symbolism and Literary Devices and Their Relationship to the Meanings and Themes of Stories**

---

Students take great joy in being introduced to symbolism and in exploring symbolism as an analytical lens. Again, remember what Donna Santman says about cliché. The notion that the fence in *The Other Side* is more than a wooden fence, that it is a metaphoric fence, is an absolute epiphany to readers who haven’t investigated the history of the color line in this country. “Wait,” they’ll say. “This fence . . . it’s not just in Clover’s backyard.” Investigating and articulating symbolism has tremendous

intellectual potential for young readers. Because that fence wasn't just in Clover's yard, and that fence manifests itself differently in different places, times, and situations. Teach your students, therefore, that one way readers are moved by literature is that we are moved by the symbols that seem significant. We can begin to see and say that objects, for instance, have symbolic importance. Usually, you simply need to give a stream of examples and invite students to add to this stream during your lesson for students to grasp how symbolism works: the fence in *The Other Side* and fences in anyone's lives, the dragon in *The Paper Bag Princess* and the dragons that any of us face in our lives. Move from these obvious, explicit symbols to ones that may be less obvious and more metaphoric—the hat that symbolizes gang acceptance in Eve Bunting's *Your Move*, the chess game in that same story, the dog in *Because of Winn-Dixie*—each of these objects is laden with potential meaning.

As has been your mantra in this unit, refrain from telling your students what these symbols mean, and instead issue an invitation to explore symbolism. Your students will return to old favorites and begin to dig into the texts they are reading. Show them how to use their pencils and notebooks to articulate their ideas about symbols. Expect sketches and excitement. Expect your students to notice first the grand and obvious symbols. Expect to lament that they seem to miss the smaller, more subtle ones—and then decide whether to alert them to some of these, perhaps through disguised book club conversations: “I’m just wondering about the pitcher of water, too. Have any of you wondered about that?” Or by showing how readers sometimes return to old favorites and pore over them again, reconsidering the significance of objects and moments that seemed mysterious before. It does help to teach students that in good stories, details matter.

In your second lesson of this part, you'll turn to another symbolic element that may be surprisingly new to students—the notion that titles can be symbolic as well. You'll teach your readers that often a moment comes in our reading when we realize that the title may have significance. Sometimes it is at the end of the story, and sometimes earlier in the story, when we'll come upon a line, or a scene, that seems to directly refer back to the title. Invite your readers to consider what “the other side,” and “fly away home,” and “tiger rising” mean in the context of the stories. Invite them to consider why it's *Because of Winn-Dixie* and not simply *Winn-Dixie*. Your book clubs will hopefully be zealous about returning to their conversations and arguing and defending what the titles of books they have read might mean. Usually titles have metaphoric significance, often deeply related to possible meanings of the story—what the story may be *about*. Robb gains courage; he emerges from a deeply hidden self; he is a tiger rising; he shows us that we, too, can become tigers rising.

In the following couple of sessions, you have some choices about how to increase your students' flexibility and skill with analytical thinking and synthesis in complex texts. One option is to teach them about literary devices, such as foreshadowing, repetition, and perspective, and how these devices help an author develop and complicate themes. Essentially, for students this age, we teach them that powerful readers know that in good stories, details matter, and we ask ourselves about details that seem to be

in the text without other context. For example, if there is a cat, and you are wondering why the cat is in that scene, that is the same literary device as Chekov's gun—if there's a gun in Act One, you can expect it to go off in Act Three. It's probably there as *foreshadowing*. Often, we understand how events have been foreshadowed when we *finish* a text—so you may demonstrate how we return to the beginning of a story sometimes, seeing more and delighting in how clever the author was to lay down a trail of breadcrumbs. Harry Potter readers are expert at this kind of synthesis—they can connect clues and events across literally thousands of pages of texts, and they are alert to twists. Small scenes along the way alerted Harry Potter readers to the theme that characters are not always what they seem, that Snape might be cruel but also heroic, that small character flaws may not mean the impossibility of greatness.

Return to the beginning of *Tiger Rising* and you'll find so many clues there about Robb's character, troubles, and potential, which didn't really make that much sense when we read the chapter the first time. It's only later that we recall them or revisit them. *Edward's Eyes* also demonstrates the significance of foreshadowing beautifully. Even before you begin the story, you're pretty sure there's something special about Edward. And you're pretty sure that he's dead. There are two aspects of understanding foreshadowing that help readers navigate more complex texts. One aspect is that it teaches a discipline of rapid, on-the-run rereading. Anyone who has tackled a complicated text knows that we often turn back quickly, recalling something that seems connected, that was perhaps foreshadowed earlier, and that we now recognize as being significant. So we turn back, rapidly. A second aspect of understanding the potential significance of foreshadowing is that we are alert to details that might otherwise seem random. It's the Chekov's gun syndrome. If the author inserts a detail that seems somewhat unexplained, chances are that the reader will find that it matters later, both to what happens in the story and to what the story may mean or be about. Analyzing foreshadowing well means that readers must synthesize across many, many pages of texts and that they must be comfortable holding on to some unexplained questions as they read, having faith that later, the answers will be revealed.

Another literary device that is worth teaching not just in poetry but in reading and analyzing literature is repetition. Teach your readers, for instance, that it's not just objects that may be repeated in a text. Sometimes it is lines, and sometimes there are parallel scenes, or moments—when things are almost the same but perhaps slightly different. In *Number the Stars*, for instance, the moment comes in the text when that actual line appears—more than once. An alert reader realizes that there is probably significance in that repetition. You might return to familiar read-alouds to show your readers that sometimes, a bell goes off in the reader's head, and we say to ourselves—this is here more than once. I wonder if it's important? In *Fly Away Home*, for instance, the narrator speaks repeatedly about the blue clothes they wear—the blue shirts, the blue jeans, the blue bags. The character is, clearly, not just wearing blue clothes, he *is* blue. But it's the repetition that alerts us to the character's mood—that the author chooses to make so many things blue, in repetition that alerts the reader that blue may matter. Ultimately the boy perhaps shows us that we may feel blue, but we can still hold onto hope.

Finally, you've undoubtedly taught your students before to analyze characters' perspectives and points of view, but this may be an apt time to return to that teaching and show them how to analyze and compare the significance of characters' perspectives to the possible meanings of a story. For instance, the narrator in *Fly Away Home* has a different perspective on airports than the other travelers in the story do—and thus he teaches us that places can seem very different, based on your condition. New Yorkers, for instance, know that on any given day the city may feel very different to different characters in it. If this is new teaching to your students, you'll want to teach them how to really articulate characters' perspectives by laying down their own and trying to say what it must be like for the character in the story, even to try speaking in that character's voice about their emotions and point of view. If it is reteaching, make this a repertoire lesson, and show your students now how to use what they know about analyzing characters' perspectives to say more about potential meanings and themes of the story.

## Coaching into Clubs

---

Some of your clubs may need some coaching in choosing books. They may, for instance, think that as they finish one book, in which they have talked long about a theme such as kids sometimes crack under family pressures, they may begin to search for a second book by expecting that theme to be listed on the back cover! You'll want to remind your students that good books are about many ideas and that they should trust that as they begin a second book, pretty much any good book is going to be full of ideas, and some of those ideas will turn out to be related to those in their first book. If you know that there are one or two books that will undoubtedly turn up some of the same ideas, of course, you could steer some of your club members in that direction—especially a club of more struggling readers, who may benefit from seeing obvious links between their two novels. Check in with club members as they finish their first novel and are about to begin their second novel. The more readers are tracking multiple ideas, rather than one single idea, the more they'll be ready to see thematic connections across novels.

You may also find that readers move easily into seeing that books are related by theme, but they then don't seem to expect that the books will also have many differences, and these differences will also affect the meaning of the story. Visit with clubs as they are having conversations, and if needed, push them to look at the ways in which the time or place of the novels they are discussing are different, or the characters' traits are different, and how those differences affect the ideas these books suggest.

To scaffold some of our students in their club conversations, you might try using a large index card that on one side says *talk*, and on the other side says *essayists*. This tool can be placed in between the club to support them as they reach to talk like essayists. Readers might begin talk by sharing out lots of ideas, and once they reach a place where they think, "Oh! That's it, we need to talk long about this one," readers

can flip over the card to a series of prompts that support talking like essayists. Some prompts might include:

One idea this book suggests is. . . .

One example that shows (this idea) is . . . because. . . .

Another example that shows (this idea) is . . . because. . . .

This makes me realize/think that. . . .

Or

I used to think this book was about . . . because. . . .

Now I think this book is about . . . because. . . .

This makes me realize/think that. . . .

Or

These two books are similar because they both teach that. . . .

On the one hand, though, in the first book. . . .

On the other hand, in the second book. . . .

This makes me realize/think that. . . .

A Big Question for readers to ask in club conversations is, “How do two or three different books advance the same theme differently?” These conversations will help when you have readers rehearsing and writing multiple fast-draft compare-and-contrast essays on books that seem to address similar themes. Authors may send their characters on strikingly (or at least somewhat) different journeys toward addressing and resolving a similar issue or have them (and readers through them) learn variations of the same life-lesson. In both *Those Shoes* and *Fly Away Home* the main characters must learn to go without something they desperately want. Both belong to families that struggle financially. And both boys learn to give up—at least for now—the dream of having something. For one boy it’s a pair of designer shoes; for the other it’s a home. The latter may seem a much larger want, but to Jeremy, those shoes mean so much more than a pair of shoes. And yet the paths these two boys follow toward dealing with not having what others around them have diverge. Jeremy comes close to getting what he wants, only to discover that it isn’t really possible to use the shoes himself (they are a size too small) and instead, gives them to his friend, for whom the shoes are a perfect fit. We might say that Jeremy learns (and



we learn, too) that making someone else's dream come true may not take away our own longing but can fill something else inside of us. Meanwhile, in *Fly Away Home*, Andrew never comes close to getting out of the airport; he and his dad scrape together money for small things, like food, but aren't anywhere near to having the money to rent an apartment. But Andrew finds hope in a little bird that manages, after many tries, to free itself from the airport, and he begins to take small steps toward helping his dad save. One lesson here might be that working toward a dream is sometimes enough to keep you going. The point is that both of these stories address some of the same themes, but the journeys the characters take are different. Rehearsing and writing fast-draft essays will help your students become adept at this kind of thinking, reading, and writing work.

## Additional Resources

---

This unit is a good match for your students if they have learned to read between the lines and infer about characters' emotions and traits, if they pay attention to the settings in their stories, and if they use strategies they know to figure out unfamiliar words and difficult parts of their texts as they read. If any of that work seems like it still challenges your readers, you may want to return to Unit Two: "Following Characters into Meaning" and perhaps the book club unit on historical fiction, which precedes this unit. In those units, you'll find more teaching points to support inferring about characters and navigating complex fiction. You might involve your students in assessing their readiness for this unit of study by inviting them to demonstrate a rich partner discussion about their books—and then listen for how they talk about characters' changes and about the storylines in their novels. If they're doing that work well, onward!

By this time of year, students should be choosing books wisely, using their pens to jot and keep track of characters and events in their stories, and monitoring their comprehension and stamina independently. That is, they shouldn't need you to be constantly checking on how reading is going for them—they should know how to do that for themselves. Nevertheless, you'll want to keep an eye on these essentials as your class moves into the heady intellectual work of interpretation. Kids love to talk about ideas in their stories—often more than they love to keep track of how much they are actually reading. Sometimes, as they read within book clubs, especially, they'll begin to slow down as readers. If one of your goals was to slow down your readers, because you have avid "plot junkie" readers who speed through books, then fine. If you have readers who need to keep reading at a steady pace, with lots of time for eyes on print, keep an eye on reading logs and make time for kids to look over their logs with their club members to make sure they are getting enough reading done.

As your kids begin to develop ideas about the novels they are reading, you may find that they are quick to submit ideas and slower to provide evidence, defend, and track those ideas. They love to call out a theme but need support in showing how that theme develops across a novel or across texts. You'll see that the unit offers many

strategies for finding the parts of texts that are often worth lingering in, and you'll want to look at your students' reader's notebooks and/or Post-its and listen to their conversations, to make sure they are using what they know about argument to investigate, analyze, and defend their thematic hypotheses.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

---

### Part One: Considering the Implications of Stories

- "Today I want to teach you that powerful readers know that reading is much more than finding out what characters do or what happens in stories. We know that stories are about ideas, and those ideas have the power to teach us life-lessons. We may, therefore, reconsider stories we've lived or read and rethink them in terms of the lessons or ideas they suggest. We keep in mind that good stories are about more than one idea. There may be many possible meanings of a story."
- "Today I want to teach you that as a reader, it is especially worth paying attention to moments where characters experience strong emotions or where characters make critical choices. These are the places where we as readers may learn significant lessons."
- "Today I want to teach you that as readers, we revise our original ideas as the story develops. We expect to back up our ideas with evidence from the text, and we mark, collect, and ponder moments in the text that support our ideas."
- "Today I want to teach you that just as stories are about more than one idea, ideas live in more than one story. We can find the same idea across different texts—stories, nonfiction, and even our life stories. Readers begin to compare texts that share similar themes, recalling texts we've already read and remaining alert to new texts, both literary and nonfiction, that seem to deal with similar ideas, issues, or themes."

### Part Two: Analyzing Differences: Becoming a More Detailed Reader

- "Today I want to teach you that readers realize that while stories may share the same theme, there are still many differences between stories that are worth studying. One difference we may focus on is setting—differences in the time and place where stories happen. Readers understand that these differences affect the meaning."
- "Today I want to teach you that as readers begin to compare texts, we often need to develop some systems to help us recall the texts we've read. Sometimes

making charts that list the titles, issues or themes, and characters helps us to quickly recall texts so that we can move to analyzing them. This supports us as we revisit important parts of a text we've read before and place these parts against ones we are reading now. We think across these parts by noting what's similar, what's different, and how this affects our ideas."

- "Today I want to teach you that just as we may analyze the differences in the settings of stories that are linked by theme, powerful readers often analyze the differences in characters as well. We may pay attention to their backgrounds, relationships, pressures, perspectives, and how they respond to trouble. We study how those characteristics affect our ideas about the themes."
- "Today I want to teach you that just as we can compare how different characters respond to trouble in thematically linked texts, we can compare ourselves to the characters we are studying. Doing this highlights a powerful truth that just as characters in literature often change in response to trouble, we too can change in response to our reading. That is, we can allow the characters in our stories to change how we think, feel, and act in the world."
- "Athletes access all their skills from the moment a competition begins, and so do readers. We access all our reading practices from the moment we start reading. Today I want to teach you that as we read, we try to process what is happening in the story, at the same time as we ask ourselves, 'What is this story starting to be about?' And then we keep adding in new information and having new insights, as we read."

### **Part Three: Literary Devices and Their Effect on How We Are Affected by Texts**

- "Today I want to teach you that powerful readers allow the texts we read to affect us in powerful ways. We pay attention to the objects that repeat in our texts, working to understand the deeper significance these objects may hold. We understand that physical objects may act as symbols for themes and ideas."
- "Today I want to teach you that another part of the text that is often symbolic is the title. Readers often think and talk about the potential meanings of titles. We do this work part way through our reading and as we finish a text."
- "Today I want to teach you that readers know that in good stories, details matter. We read with a special alertness to the details of our texts. We work to figure out the possible meanings of perplexing or unexplained details."

- “Today I want to teach you that readers also pay special attention to repetition—to lines or scenes that feel parallel. Usually there will be significance in those repeated moments, and readers think, talk, and write about their potential meaning.”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers analyze characters’ perspectives and points of view as a way to find deeper meanings in texts. One way they might do this is to think about the significance of characters’ perspectives on the possible meanings of a story. Readers might ask themselves, ‘How does the story go because this character is telling it? Would it go differently if a different character was telling the story?’ ”



## UNIT SEVEN

# Test Preparation

**MARCH/APRIL**

**(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: U/V)**

**T**his version of the test preparation unit was created in early 2011, based on the most recent, up-to-date knowledge on the 2011 tests and the New York State Learning Standards. It reflects a wide body of expert knowledge, and it received acclaim from schools across New York and the country. Many of the preparation tips in this unit are classic tips that will be helpful regardless of changes to the test.

The first thing to remember as you prepare students for state reading tests is that the tests are, in fact, *reading tests*. They test the level at which a student can read with strong comprehension, and in most states, including New York, they test a student's rate as well—the pace at which he or she reads with strong comprehension. In 2011, the level of text that fifth graders were expected to read and comprehend was higher than ever before. The good news is much of what is tested is what we teach throughout the year.

Students who read at high reading levels with solid reading rates, meaning they read with stamina and fluency, do well. Students who read below grade level or who read so slowly that they take an unusually long time to finish books and texts perform poorly on state tests. Thus, the best preparation for state tests is to teach your students to be stronger readers, tackling stamina, volume, and comprehension simultaneously. A major aim of this unit is to support students in bringing forward strategies for each genre that they have been taught throughout the year. And, perhaps most important of all, this unit is about supporting students in thinking logically and flexibly and transferring all they know to their test-taking.

## Stamina, Resilience, and Rate

---

Stamina is a critical factor in test-taking. Test-takers in 2011 were asked to read for *sixty*-minute blocks, during which time they encountered a great variety of texts. We cannot expect students to maintain focus and use a repertoire of strategies across many texts over sixty minutes if they have never had the opportunity to do this work. In addition to being asked to read for longer amounts of time, students were asked to read longer texts. We cannot stress enough the value of continuing to support students in building their reading stamina, both in the amount of time they read and the length of texts they read.

We recommend that you build in one day each week, perhaps called “Reading Marathon Day,” in which students are given the opportunity to read for sixty minutes across a variety of texts. On this day, you could ask students to stop periodically to jot questions or reading responses based on the genre they are reading (more on this later), but aim to keep these interruptions relatively short so that students still have plenty of time to read. In general, substantial time to read just-right texts must be respected and protected each day of the week. In other words, don’t substitute half an hour filling out a worksheet that has fifty words on it for half an hour during which a student may have read thirty pages of a book.

As the whole-class unit of study progresses, be sure to analyze reading logs, and make sure students are continually making time for independent reading inside and outside the typical school day. It is helpful to look at a reading log and think, “Is this student making time for reading?” and “Is the time consistent?” If not, be sure to design creative ways to enable that student to keep up with his or her reading. You might, for example, look at the daily schedule with your class and talk about ways to fit in more reading time across the day.

## Scheduling and Structures

---

Think carefully about how you will spend your time as well as how you will structure your days so you support independent reading, test prep, and the writing-about-reading work that your students may need in preparation for the test. One way to do this is to have a *reading/test prep workshop* in which you teach your students how to read, talk about, and answer questions about short test-like texts, as well as multiple-choice strategies; a *writing workshop*, in which you teach quick, purposeful writing, especially writing-about-reading and writing for the test; and a separate time for *independent reading*, when students continue to read just-right chapter books. During some of independent reading you could continue your small-group test-related work with students. During test-prep workshop, while students practice, you will circulate, coach students, and support them with their test-prep work. Fitting all this into the day will mean you may have to change something in your students’ schedule. Some schools protect reading time during class and accomplish their test prep during



extended day or after school. Other schools have their independent reading time during a separate, protected block and use what used to be the reading workshop times for test prep. Yet other schools substitute test prep or independent reading for some of their social studies work for two to three weeks.

Because of the possible emphasis on nonfiction texts, we recommend that you use science and social studies as a time for students to be reading a lot of nonfiction texts in at least thirty-minute blocks. Aim to provide students with a variety of texts similar in length and format to the ones they'll be reading on the test—informational passages that are two to three pages in length and that include text features such as diagrams, photos, and captions, as well as narrative nonfiction pieces like biographies. You can also provide students with interviews, advertisements, and, in grade four, how-to pieces. Give students opportunities to teach each other what they are reading, and continue to emphasize boxes-and-bullets and other finding-the-main-idea strategies.

## Getting Ready: Assembling Materials for Test Prep

---

Assemble test prep materials by collecting state tests from previous years. If you live in a state other than New York, make your own packet of texts from actual tests. Assemble texts from the last few years of state tests, using texts from earlier grades as well as your own grade, and put the passages in order of difficulty. So, if you are a fifth-grade teacher, you might have on the top of the pile a realistic fiction story from third grade, then another more difficult third-grade passage, then another, then the easiest passage from fourth grade, then another fourth-grade, and then another. The first day you review with kids, you will use the easiest text. Then you can assess student success and either move to a harder text, stay with the easier one, or differentiate by groups. (A word of caution: while it might be tempting to think that strugglers need lots of practice reading too-hard texts, the evidence is overwhelming that they can't and don't read these. The last thing these readers need is to spend the three weeks prior to the test working with texts they can't read!) Be sure that some of the texts you use are longer, at least two to three pages in length.

As you design these packets, keep in mind the genres that students are likely to encounter according to their grade level. We suggest you sort materials by genre, and then by difficulty. Create some packets with lower-level texts, some with medium-level, and some with higher-level texts and aim to match these packets to readers' levels as much as possible so that students can practice test-taking strategies in texts that they can read.

Look at last year's state test first, and then look to the year before and keep in mind the genres students are apt to encounter on the state test. Here's our assessment of common possible texts for the NYS ELA. If you work in a New York State School, we recommend you visit the NYS ELA website: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/ela/>. See

our website, [tc.readingandwritingproject.com](http://tc.readingandwritingproject.com), for levels of passages from previous years' tests.

Previously tested genres for fifth grade include:

<b>Narrative (Story) Structure:</b> Realistic fiction Historical fiction Science fiction Folktales Book excerpts/literary works Plays Narrative nonfiction (including biography and autobiography)	<b>Expository Structure (Nonfiction):</b> Reports Information pieces Interviews Questions and answers Letters  <b>Poetry</b> Narrative poems Informational poems
---	---

In addition to using past tests, we recommend that you supplement your packets with additional material. One way to do this is to take a text such as a short story, article, or poem, and make a series of test-like questions to go with it. Good sources for these texts are *Highlights*, *Cricket*, *Cobblestone*, *Read and Rise*, *Storyworks*, and *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. You might put these questions in the same order for each text so the first question is a main idea question, the second is vocabulary in context, the third is about mood/emotion/tone, the fourth is a genre question, and so on. Then, make the same kinds of questions for different levels of texts—a story at a J/K level, a story at an M/N level, a story at a P/Q level. This will allow you to track how a student is doing on particular kinds of reading work at each level. It may be that a student can't answer main idea questions; it may be that he can answer them successfully only until the text is over level N. In that case, you'll know that over that level he doesn't need main idea help but rather some strategies for reading too-hard texts, such as skimming, summarizing, underlining, jotting, and using pictures and headings. Teach him those as you continue to sharpen his main idea strategies, such as reading the first and last sentence only of each paragraph.

Organize the texts, deciding on the order of the different genres, so this supports your teaching. You will be using these texts to reinforce the reading strategies, predictable questions, languages, and strategies for answering multiple-choice questions.

## How to Approach Test Prep and Getting Started on Accessible Texts

There are two main approaches to test prep to get students ready for their daily learning and practice. First, students must be alert as they read. They should have expectations of how a text will go based on their understanding of a particular genre. In

fictional stories, students should read thinking about what challenges the main character faces and how he or she resolves these problems. Teach students to be alert for some of the predictable questions as they read, such as the lesson a text teaches or the big, main idea of a text.

Second, students need to be able to read the question stem and predict the answer before looking at the answer choices. This way, as they read they'll do much more smart reading work and won't be seduced by the distractors among the answers. In fact, the first few times students practice, you might choose to not give them the answer choices and instead have them write in the answer and/or circle in the text the part that supports their answer. Students are easily confused by multiple-choice answers (that's the point of the distractors); therefore, it's important to teach them to construct a text-based response first, before revealing the possible answers. For a day or two, you could have them write answers to questions without showing them the answers; then teach them to cover the answers, go back to the text, and predict the answer based on their understanding, then match their prediction to the answer choices.

You might find that you can do a lot of your test preparation in the beginning using short texts with which students are already familiar, introducing the kinds of questions that will be asked, and teaching students how to infer the answers from the texts. When you know students are familiar with a story, you have a special window into assessing because you'll know whether it is the language of the questions with which they are struggling. If this is the case, you can do some small-group instruction on common test language.

Begin the work with a prompted read-aloud of one text with partner talk, and then have your students immediately answer the multiple-choice questions. If you start with realistic fiction, choose the easiest text first. Assess students' success. Decide if you need to address what the test is looking for when certain kinds of questions are posed. Do you need to teach your students to determine the meaning of vocabulary words by reading them in context? Do you need to teach them that the main idea or the theme usually refers to a big lesson the character learns or that we learn? Do this again the next day, probably with a prompted read-aloud, or if you think students are ready, with silent partner reading and partner talk as they go. Then do a third day on the same genre, with silent reading and independent work and with small-group work, if you need it, though you may be coaching during this time and doing some small-group work in extended day. Another option is to make test prep not an isolated act and to have partner work be heavy on Days Two and Three, and wean until partners meet on Day Five after they have read and answered the questions. A possible week of test prep might go like this:

<b>Day One</b>	<b>Day Two</b>	<b>Day Three</b>	<b>Day Four</b>	<b>Day Five</b>
<p>Shared Experience</p> <p>Together the class works on reading one text and answering the questions.</p> <p>The teacher leads the class by providing students with prompts and strategies that will help them navigate and hold onto the text, as well as demonstrating through think-alouds.</p> <p>Some sections are read aloud while other sections are read together or in partnerships.</p>	<p>Heavy Partner Work</p> <p>After a minilesson is given, partners read the leveled text together and stop to talk about what they've read.</p> <p>You will confer with partners as they read.</p> <p>Next, partners read each question and talk about what it means and what they have to do as test-takers to answer it. Then they write an answer in a short, simple sentence. Then they look at the choices and pick the answer that is closest to theirs, unless there is a better answer.</p> <p>You will confer with partners as they answer the questions.</p> <p>At the end of the workshop, partners who read the same passage gather in small groups to compare their choices and to discuss why they chose them. You will intervene by pushing students to explain their logic, by teaching a strategy, and by teaching content (alliteration, metaphor, main idea) and/or to compliment.</p>	<p>Heavy Partner Work</p> <p>After a minilesson is given, partners read the leveled text together and stop to talk about what they've read.</p> <p>You will confer with partners as they read.</p> <p>Next, partners read each question and talk about what it means and what they have to do as test-takers to answer it. Then they write an answer in a short, simple sentence. Then they look at the choices and pick the answer that is closest to theirs, unless there is a better answer.</p> <p>You will confer with partners as they answer the questions.</p> <p>At the end of the workshop, partners who read the same passage gather in small groups to compare their choices and to discuss why they chose them. You will intervene by pushing students to explain their logic, by teaching a strategy, and by teaching content (alliteration, metaphor, main idea) and/or to compliment.</p>	<p>Less Partner Support</p> <p>After a minilesson is given, students read alone (reading the same passage as their partner), then talk about what they read.</p> <p>You will confer with individuals as they read.</p> <p>Then the students answer the test questions alone before discussing the choices they made and why they made them. If there is a disagreement, they will revisit the text.</p>	<p>Independent</p> <p>You will confer with partners as they discuss the choices they made.</p> <p>After a minilesson is given, students read alone (reading the same passage(s) as their partner) and answer the questions.*</p> <p>You will observe and take notes as students read and answer the questions. These notes will inform your small-group instruction.</p> <p>Partners meet afterward to discuss their answers and how they reached them.</p> <p>You will confer with partners as they discuss the choices they made.</p> <p><i>*As the test approaches, give students time limits that match those of the test.</i></p>

Students benefit from doing this work first in partnerships on accessible texts. Encourage them to write on their texts just as they will on the ELA test. For tips on teaching into students' note-taking, see the sections on predictable questions by genre and road-mapping, further in this write-up.

After a day or two on accessible short texts, do the same kind of work at the level of the test, with the exception of kids who read far below grade level. These students may need to keep practicing on texts that are closer to their level and to move more slowly toward ones at grade level. Then repeat these days across genres, not forgetting to include all the kinds of narrative, non-narrative, and poetry that will be on the test.

## Progression of the Unit

---

The big work of this unit is not to teach new reading strategies for each genre; it is to support students in bringing forward all they have learned all year about each genre. That is to say, this unit is not about teaching students that realistic fiction pieces have a problem and a solution and that the character often changes. This unit is about *reminding* students all they already know about the elements of realistic fiction and teaching them ways that questions might be phrased that ask about these elements. It is also about helping students to see connections between genres, for example, reminding them to use all they know about story structures in fiction to identify important elements in biographies. The work, then, will be to support students in reading passages and holding on to meaning, to review strategies students already know for each genre, to teach strategies to quickly identify genres, and to teach predictable question types for each. You will organize your teaching around genres, teaching narrative structures, non-narrative (expository) structures, and poetry, coaching your students to bring forward all they know, giving tips for identifying the genre, and teaching predictable questions for each genre.

During the final sessions of the unit (we recommend leaving about two to three days for this work), you will provide opportunities for students to practice the reading work they will be required to do on the test—reading flexibly across genres. During this part of the unit, provide your students with a variety of texts and support them in efficient use of strategies as they move from genre to genre.

For each genre, teach your students they can use the same strategies of marking the text, predicting, writing the answer, and then matching it to the choices. Gradually, they will come to just say the answer in their head and match it to the choice. To ready themselves to answer these questions, they need to know what to pay attention to as they read for each genre. Teach your students that they are guided in their reading by their knowledge of what kind of text is in front of them.

There are some common skills that help students tackle any text, including the ones of the test. Teach students to preview the text to ascertain its subject and structure, making a quick reading plan and breaking the text into manageable chunks. Then, when students read across these chunks, they can use strategies to summarize,

synthesize, and determine where any difficulty lies and use the appropriate strategy to cope with it. There is a slight adjustment to the particular strategies students will use in reading and answering multiple-choice questions. On the day of the test, they cannot use the strategy of finding an easier text to help them, nor can they build prior knowledge by reading related texts, nor can they reject texts because they are boring or irrelevant to them. On the other hand, students can use a bundle of strategies to access recognizable and familiar schema to help them move through these texts and the commonly asked questions that follow. Help students realize and sharpen the strategies they know, coach them to make smart decisions about accessing strategies, and increase their familiarity with common text structures and test tasks. The goal of this unit is to create flexible and resilient readers.

## Narrative

---

If it's a *narrative* text, readers expect to pay attention to and infer about characters. Students need to be alert for what kind of people characters are. What do they want? What challenges do they face? How do they overcome these challenges? How do they change? What do they achieve? What lessons are learned? In *historical fiction*, *biography*, *folktales*, and *science fiction*, there may be a question about the setting. Students may need to infer a lesson from the story. They will probably answer a question about how the character changes and how that change happens. They may need to infer the character's point of view or perspective.

One important note on biography and autobiography texts: research of our data shows that, in general, students do well on the questions asking about narrative aspects of these text types (e.g., what did the character want), but they don't do as

### Predictable Questions on Narrative Passages

What is the main problem or struggle in the story?  
Which character trait would you use to describe the character?  
What was the cause of this event?  
What is the same about these two characters? What is different?  
Why do you think the character took the action that she did?  
Why do you think the author put this minor character in the story?  
Which of the following is a detail from the story that explains how the character solves the problem?  
Which of the following details is not important to the plot?  
What can you conclude about the character from the story?  
From whose point of view is the story told?  
(Historical Fiction/Science Fiction) How does the setting fit with the story? Why did the author use this particular setting?  
What can we learn about the time period through the setting?  
(Folktales) What moral or lesson does the passage teach?  
(Biography) What were the character's achievements? What motivated the character to do what he or she did? Which of the following is a fact about the character's life?



well on questions asking about the information taught in the passage. Be sure some of your teaching includes direct instruction on how to extract not just the story but also *information* from biographies.

## Non-Narrative/Expository

---

If it's a *non-narrative* or *expository* text (including information texts, advertisements, and interviews), readers may expect to pay attention to and infer from the structure, headings, and topic sentences. Students will need to read ready to answer questions about the purpose or main idea of the article. They may be asked to provide evidence to support the author's argument or to differentiate between fact and opinion. They may need to identify the genre and know where they would expect to find it. For both fiction and nonfiction, students will probably be asked the meaning of a vocabulary word in context.

If it's a *how-to* text, readers may expect to pay attention to what is being made or what the experiment is, to what's new at each step (usually a material and how it is being used), and to learn how the how-to object is used or works or what it shows. There may be questions about what items are needed in a step, what to do right after or right before the step. Students may need to consider the main purpose of the article as well as the most important part.

### Predictable Questions on Non-Narrative Passages

What is the main idea of the passage?  
What is the article mostly about?  
What is the purpose of the article?  
Why is the author giving this information?  
Which detail supports the main idea that \_\_\_\_\_?  
What is the purpose of the illustration/diagram?  
What is the structure of the passage?  
Which of the following is a fact from the passage?  
Which of the following is an opinion from the passage?  
(Interview) What do the questions that are being asked tell us about the main purpose of the interview?

## Poetry

---

If the text is a *poem*, readers should expect to pay attention to what the big meaning of the poem could be, what the poem is mostly about, or what it demonstrates or teaches. There may be questions about imagery or the meaning or symbolism of a part or line. Students may have to answer a question about figurative language such as personification, simile, or metaphor. In all texts, for all grades, readers consider the

author's purpose, asking themselves, "What does the author want to teach me? What does he or she want me to feel?"

### Predictable Questions on Poetry

Read these lines from the poem \_\_\_\_\_. What do these lines most likely mean?

Which line best describes how \_\_\_\_\_ expresses \_\_\_\_\_?

What point of view do \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ share?

There is alliteration in lines \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

Which of these words from the poem imitate a \_\_\_\_\_?

The author is telling you \_\_\_\_\_ about the characters?

The character in the middle decided to \_\_\_\_\_.

Which element of poetry is not found in these stanzas?

What feeling is the speaker expressing in the poem?

The statement \_\_\_\_\_ (figurative language) means \_\_\_\_\_.

What is the rhyme scheme on the first stanza of this poem?

The tone of the poem is \_\_\_\_\_.

According to the \_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_ symbolizes \_\_\_\_\_.

The narrator sees the main character in the poem as \_\_\_\_\_.

How does the poet feel about \_\_\_\_\_?

Who is talking in the poem?

## Reading a Variety of Texts

During this part of the unit, students will read a variety of texts and will need to think flexibly and draw on strategies they have learned while studying the different text types. Your teaching points, then, should focus on using a repertoire of strategies. Teach students to determine the text type and read strategically, holding on to predictable questions for that genre as they read. You'll want to coach your struggling readers with modified strategies, helping them to make sense of what they are reading and not to get too hung up on holding on to predictable questions.

## Road Mapping: Reading Passages Actively and Annotating in Smart Ways

One of the most important skills test-takers can have is active reading—not just reading for the ideas in the passage but using the *structure*, or *genre*, of the passage to hold on to ideas and to locate details easily when they approach the questions. Grouping information into categories is a much more effective way to hold on to ideas than trying to remember all of the details from the passage.

One way test-takers can practice reading actively is by making a "road map" of a passage—a mini-outline that helps them to hold on to the overall structure of the passage, get a sense of important ideas, and quickly locate relevant details from the passage

to answer questions. For many test-takers, underlining ideas is not as effective as jotting a few keywords or a phrase after each section to help them to remember what is stated there. Many test-takers either underline too many ideas to be able to differentiate important ones or don't understand what they are underlining. If you find that is the case, encourage your students to put ideas into their own words in the margins. Doing so not only boosts their understanding but also provides a clearer reference to locate answers. You can teach students how to create road maps depending on the passage type. Road maps should consist of the gist (main idea or most important ideas) of each section, written in the margins at the end of that section, as well as a few notes that will help them answer commonly asked questions, such as the main idea or main problem.

Underlining parts of the text is a helpful strategy for some test-takers. Of course, you will need to determine which students in your class benefit from this and which don't. This strategy won't be helpful for those students who underline almost the whole text. It is also helpful if students spend time underlining or starring the parts of the texts where they found or inferred their answers. This benefits them when they talk to a partner about how they are answering questions, and it helps you see what they are doing so that you can then coach them. For instance, a student may underline a part where she found or inferred the answer to question 3, and write a "3" in the margin next to it so you can see what she is doing. Marking up the text also prompts students to revisit earlier parts. A word of caution: this is meant as a temporary scaffold, which you will work to remove as the test approaches.

## **Reading Difficult Passages and Students Who Struggle with Road Mapping**

---

Road mapping is an effective strategy when students are reading difficult passages. When passages are difficult, chunking the passage into smaller sections can be helpful. Students may need to stop more often to jot a gist. If students struggle to jot down gists that are main ideas for sections, they can also jot down words that seem important that will offer clues to the structure of the passage and where to find answers to detail questions.

Encourage students who struggle with timing to annotate the text with symbols so that they can locate important details more easily. For example, when reading narratives, students can put a "P" near sections that deal with the main problem and a "C" near sections where a new character is introduced.

## **Multiple-Choice Questions**

---

Determining question types can be very effective for some students. But do monitor your students' use of this strategy carefully. What is most important is that students take the time to really understand what the question is asking them to do. Don't let students waste valuable time figuring out question types unless they are proficient at

reading the passages. Note that this strategy may not be effective for strugglers, who should just focus on making sense of the passages.

Strategies for multiple-choice questions differ depending on the type of question. For example, for questions that ask about details in the passage, test-takers who have the time and know-how to scan and find passages should go back to the section being referenced to find the answer so they won't be swayed by wrong answer choices that are especially tempting (and written to lure readers away from the right answer). But on main idea questions, test-takers should predict the answer based on what they believe to be the main idea. Teach test-takers the common question types and teach them to differentiate one question type from another. To do this, help them understand the different ways that each question type might be worded.

## Main Idea Questions

---

These are about the passage overall. Wrong answers to these questions will usually be answers that are true and grounded in the passage but are about only one part of the passage rather than encompassing the whole passage. To answer main-idea questions, it's often best for readers to think about (and generate) the main idea before reading over the optional answer choices—this way readers won't be swayed by choices that are only about part of the passage. When looking at the answer choices, it's best for a reader to ask, not "Is this true of the passage?" but rather, "Does this answer choice apply to the whole passage or to just one part of the passage?" Test-takers should read *all* before selecting one.

### Possible Main Idea Questions

- What is the **main idea** of the passage?
- Which is the **best title** for the passage?
- What is the passage **mostly** about?
- What is this story **mostly** about?
- Which choice best tells what the passage is about?
- The story is **mainly** about . . .
- What's the **main** problem in the first paragraph?

- In the story, what is the character's **main** problem?
- Where does **most** of the story take place?

## Main Idea Question Strategies for Strugglers

---

Because strugglers often have difficulty holding on to larger chunks of text, you can teach them to stop frequently to think about the main idea. On nonfiction passages, they can stop after the first paragraph and think, "What is the *main* thing this passage is teaching me?" and they can continue to stop after each paragraph or section, considering whether what they have read fits with their prediction about what the passage is mainly teaching or whether to revise their idea. They can do this same work on fiction passages, asking themselves instead, "What is the character's *main* problem?"

## Detail Questions

---

These questions ask about details or about parts of the passage, and the answers can be found directly in the passage. These questions are often referred to as "right there" questions. The best way to answer these questions is usually to go right back to the part of the passage where the detail can be found. You can teach students that after reading a detail question, it helps to think, "Will this be at the start of the passage? In the middle? Toward the end?" and go to that section of the passage rather than rereading the entire passage. Even if test-takers think they know the answer, they should reread that part to double-check. Then they should predict what the answer will be before looking at the choices.

Some detail questions are essentially sequencing questions. While it is not important that students learn all of the different varieties of detail questions, it is important to support their use of accumulation strategies for fiction and nonfiction texts. As students read fiction, they can hold on to plot details that are related to the main problem. As they read nonfiction, they can look for text structures that have a sequence, such as how-to or cause-and-effect structures.

## Possible Detail Questions

- What does the character do after he goes to the park?
- Which detail best supports the idea that. . . ?
- Which fact from the article best describes. . . ?

- Which event in the story happens first?
- In which section of the article can you find the answer to the following?
- What does line 4 mean when it says . . . ?
- What happens right before . . . ?
- Which phrase **best** explains how the character felt?
- According to the passage, what happened **right before** . . . ?
- What does this line mean?
- Which event happens **first** in the story?

## Detail Question Strategies for Strugglers

---

It is important that students learn to read detail questions very carefully. Many wrong answer choices are details from the text, but they do not answer the question posed. Teach strugglers to restate the question before thinking about an answer. If it is clear from the question where in the passage to look for the answer (for example, sequencing questions often refer to a section of the passage, such as “Which event happens first?”), then students can go back to that section to look for the answer. However, particularly when the passages are longer, strugglers won’t have time to go back and look for details. One strategy you can teach is to take notice of details that seem to repeat in the passage, because these will often be asked about in the questions. Strugglers also can use what they know about the genre to find relevant details.

## Inference Questions

---

These questions ask about ideas that are implicit (not explicitly stated or “right there”) in the passage. These questions are also often called “think and search” questions. It is important to note that students are not learning new reading strategies to deal with this question type. Instead, they are using strategies such as envisionment, developing theories, and synthesis to draw conclusions about texts. There are types of inference questions, such as cause-and-effect, theme, and author’s purpose. It may not be necessary to teach students these different question types. It can be confusing, particularly for strugglers, to think about and attempt to manage multiple question types. What is important for all readers to know about these questions is that they are



about what conclusions a reader can draw from the passage and that the answers will not be explicitly stated.

Typically, these questions call on test-takers to use ideas they can generate by thinking about the whole passage. Wrong answer choices are often about only one part of the passage, and sometimes a wrong answer will contradict some part of the passage. Test-takers should read the question and predict an answer, making sure that their prediction doesn't go against any part of the passage. Then, test-takers could look at each answer choice, thinking about whether each one is a conclusion or a big idea that can be drawn from the passage. They should read all answer choices before choosing one.

### **Possible Inference Questions**

- After reading the article, what could the reader conclude?
- Why did the author most likely include this character in the story?
- What will the characters most likely do next?
- Which event from the story could not really happen?
- The word *degree* in sentence two most likely means. . . .
- Why did the author most likely write the article?
- What is the main lesson that the story teaches us?
- After reading the passage, what could the reader conclude?
- This passage is most like a. . . .
- Why did the author most likely write this passage?

### **Inference Question Strategies for Strugglers**

---

This question type can be the most difficult for strugglers. It is important that strugglers learn to identify genres to think about questions that will mostly likely be asked as they read. For example, on fiction pieces the reader is often asked about the lesson that can be learned from the story. It is helpful for strugglers to look for the lesson *before* going to the questions and then look for the choice that matches their prediction.

## Wrong Answer Types

---

These strategies are for test-takers who are already doing well and who could use these strategies to avoid wrong-answer traps and potentially score a few more points. A word of caution: some test-takers misuse these strategies and eliminate the correct answer. As with any strategy, these may not be appropriate for all of your students. However, they may be effective as an alternative option for students who get hung up by answer choices that relate to only part of the passage or that misconstrue a detail from the passage.

Additionally, some readers will be tempted by choices where the answer relates to the reader's outside knowledge but is not within the scope of the passage—these answers may sound correct to the reader. Urge test-takers to stick to ideas from the passage, not from their previous experiences with the topic. One of the best strategies test-takers can use to avoid being swayed by tempting wrong answers is to predict an answer before looking at the choices.

### Classic Wrong Answers

- Choices that say the opposite of the main idea or the facts
- Choices that twist the facts or the main idea; an example could be naming only part of the main idea
- Choices that mention true points from the passage but that don't answer the question being asked

## Teaching Students to Deal with Difficulty

---

You will absolutely want to teach students ways of dealing with difficulty. Even just-right texts pose puzzles. Too often, students generate one idea about a text and then continue to hold tightly to that idea even when the upcoming text points to the fact that it is wrong. Reading is a process of revision. Accomplished readers continually realign in our minds what we thought the text said with what we are now uncovering. The revision-of-reading work that students do now will influence each successive first-draft on-the-run reading as they go forward. If a student realizes she misread because she imagined that an extraneous detail was the main idea, the next time she reads she'll be less apt to do this. Jotting notes or headings in the margins helps summarize text, so students can quickly refer to those sections rather than reread them, which they won't have time to do. Of course, all students won't necessarily have to do this type of work to be successful. Then, too, you'll want to wean students off of this

strategy as they get closer to the test, because they won't have time to do this self-correcting under exam conditions.

Teach students to skim texts that are very hard for them, to summarize as they look for main ideas, to move past hard words unless there are questions that refer to those words, and to dig into hard parts only for the purpose of answering questions. One of the most important things you can teach students is to learn to read on, to keep going, and to not get demoralized when the text is too hard. Moving on and staying alert to the things they need to look for should help students do better on each subsequent text. When texts are really far-reaching, you may want to teach students to read and underline just the first sentence of every paragraph to get a sense of what that passage is about, and then to move to the questions. Sometimes just reading the first sentence of each paragraph is enough for a student to answer a question. If the answer isn't in the first sentence, it may at least be in that paragraph.

Students will inevitably face difficult words on the ELA. The vocabulary work you do just prior to the test, then, will be synonym and contextual-clue based to prepare students. Because this work will occur on the brink of the test, now is probably not the best time to teach readers to persevere over difficult words or to make a stab at pronouncing them. Instead, for now, teach students to substitute a synonym or best-guess understanding for an unknown word and to keep on reading. Tell them to underline the difficult word, too, so when they reach the end of the passage they can go back and tackle that word if necessary. The question they will most likely need to do this for will read something like, "In line 16, what does the word X mean?" Students can often figure out the answers to questions such as these by thinking about what's happening in that part of the story or article. Keep in mind, too, that to answer a question like that, students do not need to pronounce the word.

As students approach the test, you can also teach them specific multiple-choice strategies, such as monitoring time by figuring out how many questions there are and how many minutes they have. Teach them strategies for elimination. For example, you might want to teach them to eliminate the answers that are found in the passage but to not answer the question. Or they can eliminate answer choices (only after they have read through all of these) when they think of the correct answer before they look at the answer choices that don't match or aren't close to their own. Show them how to mark their answer sheet and to avoid skipping any questions as they go. Teach them to return to questions they were unsure of if they have time at the end, and most of all, teach them to keep going! This kind of teaching and learning is not invigorating and can only be sustained for a few weeks, so do it intensely, but briefly.

## Small-Group Work

---

During this unit, you'll want to pull small groups each and every day during independent reading time, not during the test-prep workshop, when you need to be conferring with and coaching students as they read and answer questions. To form small

groups, you'll want to review last year's test and do an item analysis for each student, noting his or her strengths and weaknesses. Look for patterns in your students' work on last year's test to ensure you are teaching skills your students really need. In other words, if a student answered a main idea question incorrectly on one passage, look to see if he or she answered other main idea questions incorrectly before putting that student in a small group on main ideas. It could be that the passage was too hard or the student didn't understand the question as it was posed. If you believe this to be the case, work on predictable question prompts that ask about a main idea and confer into the student's independent reading. You'll also want to review your record keeping and observational notes throughout the unit, as well as completed test-prep passages, looking for patterns. You will pull together students who are having trouble with a particular genre, a level of passage, particular types of questions, test terminology, short answers, or distinguishing between a good answer and the best answer. Often teachers think they have to use new materials when working with small groups, but in fact, it is possible to reuse passages and questions that students struggled with in the past, teaching them strategies to help deal with this difficulty in the future. That is, the goal isn't for students to be able to answer *a particular* question on *this* test. Rather, the idea is to teach them strategies that will help them tackle *similar* questions on future passages. You can also reuse a passage but create new questions that address whatever it is students do not quite understand. Students may benefit from an additional shared experience or shared reading of a particularly challenging part of the text or perhaps another shared writing experience for the short responses.

## Read-Aloud

---

Your read-aloud will support students' multiple-choice work as well as their listening skills. When you read aloud as part of test prep, choose passages you think are similar to the ones students will encounter on the test and that can be read in one sitting. The read-aloud will also be different in structure. Focus on getting your students oriented to the text and to their job as readers of such a text, rather than thinking aloud. Prompt readers for their upcoming listening and thinking work, rather than demonstrating this thinking after reading. On the 2011 test, the fifth-grade listening selection was an information text (though of course we can't guarantee this will be the case for next year), and it was accompanied by five multiple-choice and three short-answer questions. We recommend that the bulk of your read-alouds are information texts, but that you do read aloud some narratives and continue to do the predictable question work described above.

Because read-aloud will help students with both the listening selection and the multiple-choice, be sure to read aloud each nonfiction genre. Students should expect that a nonfiction text is going to teach them something. In narrative nonfiction they need to use what they know about story (paying attention to characters, including the obstacles characters face and their achievements) and what they know about nonfiction

(looking for the specific idea a text teaches and how the story demonstrates the idea). You'll especially want your test-prep read-aloud to include narrative nonfiction for grades that will encounter more of this structure. Common passages on the test include sports, historical, and scientific figures and fiction and narrative nonfiction in which the character is an animal.

For the fiction and fable read-alouds, teach students to get ready to listen by thinking about what they know about how stories go and about their jobs as readers—they are mostly listening for *character, problem, and solution*. Prompt them to listen for clues about the setting and the characters. Use predictable questions for each genre to plan your think-alouds and student interactions. Be sure to refer to the charts you use in minilessons. After the first section of the story, encourage partners to turn and talk, and listen for how they may need coaching. Similarly, you might pause in the middle of the story, coaching students to turn and talk about what they've learned about the characters, their relationships, and the challenges they faced. As you get ready to read the end of the story, prompt students to listen for how people change and how problems are solved. Give them an opportunity again to turn and talk about these inferences. Finally, coach them to infer possible lessons the story teaches and to talk about the author's possible purposes. The next time you read aloud, have students talk to a partner beforehand, reviewing what they know about how stories go and what they need to pay attention to as they listen. Continue to interrupt the story so that they can turn and talk at appropriate intervals. Next time, move them to stop and jot their responses, and finally to jot responses to ELA-like short-answer questions. This way, the read-aloud prepares students both for the listening selection, explicitly teaching them to listen with their minds turned on and to hold a story in their heads, and for the multiple-choice sections, as they listen and come to expect predictable questions.

When you begin your read-aloud work on short passages, use prompts that help transfer what you've been doing earlier in the year to these texts. You might, for example, begin by saying, "We just learned some important information about Trudy. Turn and talk about what you learned. And what does that tell you about her?" Or "This lets me. . . . Turn and talk about what this lets you know." Or "What's the big thing that just happened?" Or "Turn and talk about what you think is going to happen next in the story." Of course, you'll want to use test language as you make your way in this unit so that when you read aloud, the prompts will now sound like the types of questions students are asked on the test. For example, "Turn and talk about what Trudy wants." Or "Turn and talk about what words best describe Trudy. Trudy is. . . ." Or "What's that part mostly about?" Or "If the story had continued, what would most likely have happened next?"

Similarly, reading poetry aloud supports students' work on the multiple-choice section of the test. Some of the questions you'll want students to think about are: What is this poem mostly about? What does it teach? What is the big meaning of the poem? Teach them also to notice structure and to recognize and name imagery and figurative language in a poem and to consider the effect of these.

## Timing Guidelines

---

Because students are testing under timed conditions, eventually timing will need to be part of the preparation that they do. Many students need additional coaching on how to use allotted time wisely, both to finish within the time constraints and to not rush through, finishing well before the time is over but not checking their work carefully. At first, what is paramount is that students get plenty of practice becoming more comfortable with test-taking strategies, such as note-taking while reading, so at the start of the test-prep unit, don't worry too much about timing.

One way to start practicing timing is to consider approximately how much time students will have on average for each passage in the section. Here are timing guidelines for the reading comprehension section:

Grade	Number of Passages	Number of Questions	Minutes
5	6–7	35	60

On average, students should take about nine minutes to read each passage. Of course, longer passages will take more time, shorter passages not as much. You can give students a baseline timing assessment by giving them two passages, each two to three pages long, and accompanying questions, typically one fiction and one nonfiction. Ask students to read both passages and answer the questions, using all of the strategies that they know, including marking up the passage. Record each student's time, making note of students who take much longer or much shorter than about eighteen minutes.

If you have students who take much longer than eighteen minutes, work with them on the strategies they are using to read the passage. They might be taking too long to read the passage, spending too much time marking it up before they go on to the questions. Or, they might be taking too much time going back to the passage to reread to find answers. Work with them on streamlining their active reading so that they are writing only basic gists for each section and not underlining and highlighting too much. Also work with them on predictable questions for each genre as well as strategies for each question type so that they don't spend too much time rereading the passage for answers to questions that aren't explicitly stated or scouring the passage looking in the wrong places for details.

If you have students who finish really quickly, check their responses. Our data shows us that test-takers, strugglers in particular, often read much too quickly. When students miss more than one or two questions, teach them to stop more frequently, thinking about predictable questions for each genre and holding on to as much information as possible before going to the questions. If most questions are correct, you might not have to work too much on timing. One final note about timing—it usually



is more beneficial for students to spend more time on each passage instead of spending their remaining time going back and checking their answers at the end, because their recall will be much sharper right after reading a passage.

## Things to Work on with Struggling Test-Takers

You will want to teach your strugglers strategies for navigating difficulties on the test. In the beginning, it is helpful to teach them some strategies for tackling multiple-choice questions. Teach students to read each question and ask, “What does the question mean?” “What is it asking me to do?” You might want to create a game that helps students learn what predictable questions are asked on their test. Questions on the test fall into one of two categories. There are questions that ask the reader to think of the whole of the text, and there are questions that ask them to think of a part, a line, or a detail. You might want to put questions in an envelope and on the outside of one side of it write “W” and on the other side write “D.” Students can dump out the questions and turn them over, and then take turns reading the questions and putting them under the “W” (think of the whole of the text) or “D” (think of a detail from the text).

### Questions to include in the envelope:

Whole-Text Question	Detail Question
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After reading the passage, what could the reader conclude?</li> <li>• In the story, what is the character’s <b>main</b> problem?</li> <li>• This passage is <b>most</b> like a . . .</li> <li>• Where does <b>most</b> of the story take place?</li> <li>• The story is <b>mainly</b> about . . .</li> <li>• What is this story <b>mostly</b> about?</li> <li>• Why did the author <b>most likely</b> write this passage?</li> <li>• This passage is <b>mostly</b> about . . .</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What’s the <b>main</b> problem in the first paragraph?</li> <li>• Which phrase <b>best</b> explains how the character felt?</li> <li>• According to the passage, what happened <b>right before</b> . . . ?</li> <li>• What does this line mean?</li> <li>• Which event happens <b>first</b> in the story?</li> </ul>

You can also create the game “Which one of these sentences doesn’t belong?” Students read through a series of test questions and find the ones that are asking them to do the same work as a test-taker to find the one that is different. For example:

- What does the word \_\_\_\_\_ most likely mean?
- Which word means about the same as . . . ?

- In the first sentence, the word \_\_\_\_\_ means . . . ?
- Why did the author most likely write this passage?

It is wise to teach these youngsters to answer the question *before* looking at the choices and then to look for the answer choice that best matches theirs. If a student is having trouble answering the question, teach him to think back over the story and retell it to himself. If this does not help, he must return to the story—but not to the beginning. Instead, he should think about the part of the story that corresponds to the question and return to that part, and then reread and answer the question.

Often when novice or struggling test-takers have trouble with a question, they pick an answer they remember being in the story, and while not incorrect, it is not the best answer to the question. It is wise to teach your students that most of the answers will be found in the story and are not really wrong, but only one answers the question the best.

Among the first things you'll want to make sure students know is that boldfaced words are very important and to pay attention to them because they offer guidance about what to look for in the passages. For example, often test questions bold words like *before* and *after*.

To help students understand test language you may want to create games that they can play for ten to fifteen minutes a few times a week. One such game is Concentration. Cards are made with test language written on them, and then students have to find the match that is a description of what the test-taker has to do. It might look like this:

<b>Right Before</b> Recall or look back in the text for what came directly in front of that sentence, part, or step.	<b>Mostly About</b> Think about the whole text.	<b>Best Describes</b> Words that tell you what kind of person someone is based on that person's actions.	<b>Not</b> Refers to a statement that is not true about the text.
<b>Main Problem</b> Describes the biggest issue or challenge the character is facing.	<b>Most Like</b> Identify the genre of the passage you read.	<b>Most Likely</b> Based on what you read, what is the best explanation or meaning?	<b>Right After</b> Recall or look back in the text for what came next.

The actual cards you use should reflect the words you've been using to talk about test language and types of questions.

You'll want to teach your students the language of the test. We assume that students know what the phrases *mostly about*, *most likely*, and *most important* mean. You

might find it necessary to make these terms concrete for your students by infusing them into your classroom's daily life. You may even make collages of pictures from magazines that can be sorted a few different ways, for example, clothes, hair accessories, and winter accessories. Then you can ask your students what they think the collage is mostly about. Some students will look and sort and count that there are more clothes than anything else, and they'll say this is mostly about clothes. But students with a more sophisticated sense of sorting into a concept will be able to see that most of the items fit under a broader category, like "things you wear."

Sequence words are used a lot on the third-grade test, and so you should weave these words through your daily classroom life as well. Ask students to look at today's schedule and find out what they will be doing *first*, *right before* lunch, and *right after* reading workshop. You may also ask students to line up for lunch by using sequence words.

Students are often asked in the listening section to identify opinions, and many teachers have found it easy to teach kids the words that commonly indicate opinion, such as *best*, *most*, *greatest*, *worst*, and *very*. To support students in understanding opinion statements, it is helpful to teach these outside of the test. It is important that students understand what an opinion statement sounds like because it isn't necessary to understand the passage to be able to get this question correct. You may support students' understanding of opinion statements by giving them a factual statement, like "Today is Wednesday and we have P.E. at 10:00." Next you could ask students to generate opinion statements about this fact. For example, "Wednesday is the best day of the week because we have P.E." Bringing test language into our students' lives will demystify it and help kids gain confidence in their test-taking abilities. You may want to create a test-prep game that teaches into fact and opinion. You can create categories like baseball, movies, and New York and in an envelope put opinion and fact statements. Students will sort these into fact and opinion piles by looking for the statements that contain opinion words. For example, in the category "movies," students will read a sentence strip that has "*It's Complicated* was the funniest movie of 2009," and would then discuss whether this a fact or an opinion. They would put this in the opinion pile because it contains the opinion word *funniest*. But if they pulled the strip that said, "*Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* is a 3D movie," they would put that into the fact pile because it doesn't contain an opinion word.

You want to study what kinds of questions students are getting wrong and make up practice materials that work specifically with these kinds of questions. You'll want to create questions that mimic those your students struggled with and have them practice in small groups during test prep. For instance, to support students on a difficult multiple-choice question, pull all of the students who answered B and invite them to discuss *why* in a small-group setting. Ask, "What in the story made you choose B? Do you think it is the *best* answer?" Or you can pull kids who chose B and C together and have a debate: "Remember, what is the *best* answer?" Main idea and true/false questions are very effective for this type of small-group work.

While students are reading the test you'll move around and confer, assessing to understand what they are doing well and what they are struggling with as they read each genre, passage, and text level. When students are reading the passages some things you might want to ask them are:

- Tell me how you're making sure you understand what you're reading.
- Can you show me how you figured out what that part was about?
- Explain to me what you're doing to hold on to what you're reading.
- Do you agree with your partner when he/she said what that part is about?

When students are reading the questions and answering them with a partner or by themselves you want to hear their process, noticing where they get derailed or what is working so you can teach into or compliment their work.

- What does that question mean?
- What is the question asking you to do?
- What do you think the answer is?
- Can you think back and recall the information that answers that question?
- If you can't recall the information, where will you go to find it? Will you look at the beginning, middle, or end of the text? How do you know?
- How does what you are saying answer the question?
- Could there be any other possible answers?
- Is there a better answer?
- Tell me how you decided that is the answer.

## **Struggling and Emergent Readers—Decoding**

---

Many of our struggling and emergent readers have difficulties decoding and comprehending test passages that tend to be above their independent reading levels. If you notice some of your readers are still having a hard time working through difficult texts, you might need to devote more instructional time to decoding.

When students encounter a hard word to decode or comprehend, they can anticipate what the word should sound like and/or mean, checking what they think against what they see. Make sure they understand how to orchestrate the information. While reading, students should be sure the difficult word *looks right* (relying on grapho-phonetic clues), *sounds right* (relying on syntax), and *makes sense* (relying on semantics). Help them learn strategies to be active meaning-makers as they read.

Most important, you'll want to constantly remind your students to be flexible word solvers, using strategies repeatedly, without losing a standard pacing through a text. Once students figure out a word, they need to be taught to reread, putting the word back into context so its meaning isn't lost. Rereading is indispensable for students who are having decoding issues. On the day of the test, however, it can be problematic for kids to reread because they'll risk running out of time to complete the passages and questions. Students might have a book in their baggie from which they reread passages or chapters to read with more automaticity and fluency. This book, which might change weekly, will make them feel more comfortable with rereading quickly in the crunch of test time. The goal of all this, of course, is to have students read through the whole passage with the best possible comprehension the first time.

## Vocabulary Enrichment

---

For many students who are just starting to read texts that are full of literary or book language, the language of the test poses many challenges. The test values and assesses familiarity with book language. Often a student may understand a question, such as, "How is the character feeling in this part?" and she may correctly predict an answer, like, "Nervous." But she won't recognize the word given in the answer, which may be *apprehensive* or *anxious*. She'll know the character is a brave person but won't recognize *courageous*.

In the weeks before the test, we can't teach *all* the words that students may encounter, but you can make an effort to enhance students' familiarity with book language and to broaden the range of words they recognize and use in conversation and in writing. An excellent activity teachers and students can do is to create word walls, collecting words that describe characters in different ways. The words can be sorted into categories, such as words that describe *happy*, or *sad*, *brave*, *mad*, *scared*, *mean*, *kind*, and so on. Underneath these headings, words can be listed that mean *mostly* the same thing, such as *frustrated*, *upset*, and *enraged* for *mad*. Words can then be sorted from most to least, that is, the words that mean "more mad" can be put at the top of the list, and the words that mean "less mad" can be put at the bottom. This visual cue helps students understand the graduated meanings of these words. We're not looking for students to learn dictionary meanings but to see, and hear, and try using a wider variety of literary synonyms.

Use these word walls as you stop and think aloud for the students during read-aloud. For example, you may pause and say, "I imagine Oliver is feeling, let's see,

*apprehensive*, right now.” You may also prompt your students to use these words in their partner conversations during read-aloud—they may talk about how the character is feeling, using words from the word wall. When you do this, you’ll find that students prompt for more categories of words, as they seek words that mean *proud* or *shy*.

Students can also use these words on the Post-its they use to jot about their independent reading books. If they keep occasional Post-its that track what a character is feeling, they can revise or add to these Post-its using words from the word wall. When students write about reading (in their reader’s notebooks, as they learn to write literary essays, or in getting ready to write about reading for the test), they can revise using more literary language to describe characters.

Ways to extend this word wall work include keeping word walls in social studies and science, studying words that are related to the units of study, and keeping a word wall of words that describe stories and nonfiction, such as *engaging*, *interesting*, *fascinating*, *disturbing*, *provocative*, *lively*, *fast-paced*, *informative*, and *action-packed*.

You may also want to create a “Concentration Synonym Game” or “Word Go Fish,” in which students have to match the word with its definition. Creating games will be a fun and effective way of helping your students extend their vocabulary. Who said that test prep had to be boring?





## UNIT EIGHT

# Informational Reading

## *Reading, Research, and Writing in the Content Areas*

### MAY

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: U/V)

It's May. You made it. Congratulations! Many of you have the state test behind you, spring is in the air, and there is an entire month in front of you. As we exit a time in the year that is laden with pressure and high-stakes tests, we enter the finale of the year. Chances are energy and spirits are low for both students and teachers. It would be easy to coast through the next few months into the summer without doing much learning. However, we owe it to ourselves and our students to create a unit that feels fun, not frivolous, and to end the year strongly. This unit is designed to teach students to be skilled readers in social studies or science texts, as they are strong readers in literature. This means that in this unit, you'll focus not just on conveying the content of study but on teaching the reading skills to learn content successfully.

As you embark on this unit, it will feel similar to past units, like the nonfiction reading unit. Even though it might feel same old, same old to you, we also understand how students need multiple opportunities to practice tough, new skills like reading well in a content area. This means we'll find ways to repurpose and refresh this unit so that it feels like brand-new work for your students. The goals of this unit are clear: students will read multiple types of texts and gain rich background knowledge in new subjects, like the Civil War. Students will then follow their natural curiosities as these arise while reading and engage in quick forms of research (researching-on-the-go) about their topics. Students will move on and pursue a line of thinking that not only carries them into the past but brings them into the present day, allowing them to make connections between, say, historical events and current events.

This unit draws on the year's work in the *Content Area Curriculum Calendar*. To summarize the big reading and writing work of those units, students began the year with a focus on note-taking and using those notes as springboards to generate their own thinking in the content area. Students then moved on to using writing to learn strategies to learn new content, such as summarizing, comparing and contrasting, and analyzing quotations to name a few. Students have also had multiple opportunities to practice using talk structures, such as clubs, to deepen thinking about subjects. This unit assumes that you can, in fact, gather a variety of texts, at different levels, so that all students can read texts they can understand, and that they can read more than one text on a subject—which is absolutely crucial to developing a critical awareness of perspective and point of view. If you're uneasy about these assumptions, you don't have to have every single thing in place. It feels important to describe best practices, even if we only aspire to some of them.

You might think of this unit as providing the “early steps in growing the future college students”—ones who will, some day, learn how to find their own texts on a subject, even if their teacher doesn't provide those texts. Students will know how to forge study partnerships and will lean on the reading and writing strategies they are developing now as they embark on their sociology class or physics class. The Common Core State Standards raise the concept of students dealing with difficult texts. With the spirit of preparing students for college, you might choose to introduce excerpts of difficult texts, like the Emancipation Proclamation, showing students different strategies of how to tackle difficult texts. You may choose a variety of strategies to deal with difficult texts, ranging from the strategy of repeated readings to the method of shared reading to components of guided reading, such as the book introduction.

The drumroll of the unit will be ever-important at this time of year. Engagement and enthusiasm might be at an all-time low due to the slew of tests students have been given. This drumroll should feel like a magic trick—something unexpected, surprising, and awe-inspiring. The first couple days of this unit will break the routine and not be regular workshop days. To give shape to this unit, we'll look at the Civil War and the Underground Railroad. Of course, you would substitute content that is relevant to your particular classroom at this particular time of year. You may decide to show a film or documentary, from excerpts of *Gone with the Wind*, to *Glory*, to Ken Burns' documentary, *The Civil War*. Film is an easy medium for kids to get lost in another time, developing a more instant connection to the topic before the unit begins. You might create a dramatic reenactment of a part of the Civil War, by using Janis Herberts' *The Civil War for Kids: A History with 21 Activities* and acting out the battle of Antietam. If you have access to technology, you might utilize PBS's online companion resources to Ken Burns' *The Civil War* ([www.pbs.org/civilwar/](http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/)). Students experiment with storytelling by creating virtual photo stories of actual photographs paired with music and narration using simple, Web-based software. Either option you choose, we invite you to spend the first few days building excitement, engagement, and prior knowledge in this content-area unit.

It will be important to put this experience into context for students. It's more than just watching a movie or dressing up and creating a reenactment. You'll want to contextualize this unit for kids. We imagine you'll set it up by saying something like, "Readers, we have just spent a day or two immersing ourselves in the Civil War. We are not just excited about this time in history; we also have a shared experience to kick off our new unit. This month, we'll be studying and researching the Civil War together. We are creating a research community where we will get smart about this topic together."

This next part will feel like you are in a reality television show. A mission is at the heart of any reality show. Hosts set the team of contestants up with a mission, a task, or a project. You'll channel a host and tell students that they will work in groups to creatively, originally, and accurately present their research findings to the class. End products could range from a teachers' favorite of having kids write and publish books to add to the classroom library or students writing and filming a newscast that briefs an audience on the big news stories from the time period. Other ideas include students writing, acting, and filming a historical event that is often overlooked when discussing the Civil War, creating a multimedia photo story where the readers compile a digital photo collage and embed narration using a software like VoiceThread or write and perform a series of public service announcements bringing awareness to unjust or complicated issues during the time period. Since students will be working in groups, each group would have the opportunity to pick its own publication venue. These ideas will be discussed in depth in the final part of this unit.

Doing this whole-class research is invaluable not only as a way to gather momentum and excitement about the journey ahead but also to begin to gather main ideas and big ideas about the time period. Very soon, your students will once again be reading lots and lots of information texts. As outlined in the Common Core State Standards, they will read for main ideas and details and also to explain events and concepts based on specific information from the text. Providing your readers with rich background information on the time period will set them up to be able to contextualize and crystallize big ideas from their texts much more readily.

## A Note on Materials

---

You'll need to gather as many resources as possible, from any sources at hand. Scour the school building for books on the study you want to launch. Visit the public library with your students, and have them bring back as many texts as they can find on the topic. Teach them about interlibrary loan and book-request forms! Get online (you and your colleagues, not the kids yet), and sort through some of the great history websites and simulations that are out there—not forgetting to print some of the primary source documents that are foundational to this nation. Bookmark the sites of the Metropolitan Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, and other museums that have images and resources. Cue up a couple of clips from documentaries or history

movies on one of your classroom computers, or a DVD player, or your own laptop at a station. It seems like there will never be enough money for us to buy all the nonfiction books we want—but the kids need us to teach history anyway, and they need us all to get involved in seeking texts and building libraries to support the studies that we think are important. Help each other share resources—this may be a time when you want to stagger when you and your colleagues teach so that you can share materials.

As you gather your materials for this unit, know that this write-up invites you to organize your materials into two tiers. The first tier is a whole-class study. This is short, just a few days at the beginning of the first part. It's helpful to think of it as a survey course—kids will be reading a smattering of broad texts about the topic. The second tier is subtopics, where you'll break the topic of, say, the Civil War, into subtopics. Many teachers have found success with organizing the materials for these subtopics into bins or text sets. For example, you might make some baskets of texts that are sorted into subtopics such as the Underground Railroad, the life of Abraham Lincoln, battles, heroes and traitors, or speeches and famous documents, just to name a few examples. Student groups will rotate through these bins or text sets a number of times, three times specifically—once at the end of the first part, once during the second part, and a third and final time during the third part. As you plan, you may have your students rotate through more or fewer subtopic bins or text sets.

If resources are limited, here are a few tips when assembling subtopic bins or text sets. First, create fewer bins with more materials in the bin. This means the groups of students may be larger, but you will have less content to prepare. Second, use all forms of literacy—visual literacy, like photographs; map literacy, like old and contemporary maps of an area; media literacy, like video or audio clips. Third, there are some helpful professional resources you can draw on to compile text sets, such as Stephanie Harvey's *Toolkit Text*, Harvey Daniels' new book, *Texts and Lessons for Content-Area Reading*, or Lucy Calkin and Kathleen Tolan's *Units of Study for Teaching Reading, Grades 3–5*.

## Part One: Forming a Research Community and Reading to Build Rich Background Knowledge

---

Covering content can feel expansive, at times. There are so many moving parts and nuances of a topic, like the Civil War, that we may end up covering the entirety without going in depth. This first part is designed with this specifically in mind. It's designed to move fast, moving students from whole (the big topic) to part (a subtopic) quickly. This way, students get a sense of how that process happens with the collective support of the whole-class research community *before* moving into the following parts, which require more independent practice in smaller research groups.

Following the initial drumroll of this unit, the first day or so begins with a whole-class study regarding the big picture of the Civil War. You will have gathered students together to say that over the next few weeks, you'll be working in a research

community—a community of researchers who will all be on the same project—to get smart about the Civil War. But similar to a football team community, not everyone on the team is an expert in each position. Teammates will take on different aspects of the topic to learn and teach others. But before this happens—before students break off into subgroups—first you’ll begin establishing some common knowledge, and then you’ll help kids to specialize as they break into teams to cover a specific aspect of the topic.

Let’s get a sense for how that would look. For the first two or three days, you’ll probably want to teach your students that researchers read fairly quickly, trying to get a broad overview of the time period—the important historical places, events, and people; the biggest conflicts; and also important vocabulary. Students may be reading whole books, such as the Rosen Primary Source Civil War books, which are collections of primary source documents related to the Civil War. It’s often helpful to start a map in the room, a timeline, and a word chart for words related to this study. Students could add to these teaching tools as they study, putting up information they feel would help the class, using index cards and markers. For instance, after a first day of reading across some of the texts on the battles of the Civil War, you could probably pinpoint on a map of the states some of the places that seem to be coming up in more than one text, such as Gettysburg and Antietam, and Bull Run. On the timeline, you’ll see students putting up the date of 1863 (the Emancipation Proclamation), at the very least, which probably arises as important in many texts. Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, P. G. T. Beauregard, and Stonewall Jackson will start to become familiar names.

In these early, collective inquiry stages, remind them that right now, we want to get a lot of reading done, so we’re not stopping to write lots of notes in our notebooks. Instead, we’re using Post-its to mark information that might be important, going on and reading more, and then sharing our findings at the end of class. Teach your readers to use the strategies they already know: how to quickly walk through a book looking at how it is organized, at how much white space there is, at how dense the text is, at how much of the vocabulary is explained, and to start with a book they can read comfortably. Partners may share books, reading silently, pausing briefly to synthesize, going on, scribbling very quick Post-its as they go, and saving big conversation until they have read lots of pages.

Meanwhile, during read-aloud, read a variety of texts, including narratives of the time period, like Doreen Rappaport’s *More! Stories and Songs of Slave Resistance*, non-fiction texts, and perhaps some primary documents on The Library of Congress website. This work will assist in the Common Core State Standards-supported skill of drawing central ideas and information from primary and secondary sources. After each read-aloud experience, add to the learning tools that are posted in your room—kids will stop and jot as you read, and then at the end of the read-aloud, they could add names, places, events, and so forth to your charts in the room. As you read aloud, model making connections between what you are studying and what you have previously studied as a class. You’ll want to emphasize how the new information you are collecting is adding to the knowledge you already had. As the Common Core State

Standards remind us, students should be able to summarize new information they are collecting and distinguish new information from prior knowledge or opinions. For example, if you're learning about leaders of the Civil War, you may model or encourage students to make connections to other leaders they have learned in previous units. Laura Robb reminds us of the importance of making connections between new content learned and past knowledge to increase the likelihood of remembering the information and making meaning with the new content.

By Day Four or so, you'll guide student groups to pay attention to specific aspects of the Civil War. You will show them how to break apart a topic into smaller, more specialized and more manageable subtopics. For instance, you'll gather students together and say, "Readers, for the last two days we've taken a survey course in the Civil War. We've been working hard to get a broad overview of this time period. I noticed that a lot of you were reading, talking, and writing about slavery. It made me realize that this might be a topic that we use our research community to help break down. Slavery was incredibly complicated and complex during this time. I have done something to help groups specialize in a certain area of this topic. When you return to your groups, you'll notice that I have placed text sets at your table. Know that these are not just text sets on 'slavery.' These are more specialized. You'll see titles of the text sets like 'Harriet Tubman's Silent Leadership,' 'The Inner Workings of the Underground Railroad,' 'The North's Point of View on Slavery,' 'The South's Point of View on Slavery,' 'Politics and Slavery,' 'Children and Slavery.' For the next two days, you'll be reading in these specialized text sets."

Encourage students to keep up their reading strategies, like using Post-its to mark information that might be important or keeping track of names that repeat or specific dates that begin a chapter or paragraph. We know that if students are reading a chapter on the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman's name will be repeated often through the passage. This is something to draw students' attention to as they read. Quite simply, look for names that repeat; it will help you stay focused on the important person in this topic. Similarly, dates that are listed in the beginning of chapters or paragraphs often signify important moments in history. Teach students to search for dates as a place in the text to reread and gather important information.

At the end of this part, students will set up teaching roundtables for the research community to learn about other subtopics. In other words, kids will find a way to teach others about their specialized topic. These teaching roundtables could be informally constructed where one student from each group (one from the Harriet Tubman group, one from Politics and Slavery, and so on) come together and share their new understandings. This will be quick and informal. Some teachers will opt for students to bring some of their favorite texts to the teaching roundtable to share important facts or pages; others might opt for students to prepare a short index card's worth of information to share to the roundtable; while others prefer to have students bring a reading notebook of preplanned writing to the group to share. Either way, this will mark the end of the first part. It will be informal but informative as students share a bit of their newly acquired expertise.



Use this time to reinvigorate classroom wall space. If you haven't a moment to clear your walls of old test-prep charts or charts that may be browning or bleaching from the sun, this is the time! The nice part about a research community is that knowledge will be co-constructed. We know that publically documenting this new knowledge is one way to revisit it often and retain it. Imagine clearing enough space to include something similar to a concept map. Using this example, slavery would go in the middle with all of the subtopics branching off (that is, the south's point of view on slavery, politics and slavery, children and slavery, and so on). As a way to bring closure to the teaching roundtables, students could list out a few important facts they learned from someone's presentation to put up on the concept map. Teach students to read and interact with each other's concept maps. Students could pose questions of other groups' maps or make connections between information in different concept maps. Imagine if students could write long off of the information gleaned from studying each other's maps. Use this time to continue to fuel inquiry and knowledge-building. If more information is discovered that can be added to the timeline or word chart, don't hesitate to display it!

If you haven't already taught your students how to make on-the-run teaching tools for a classroom study, take a moment to model how to use an index card or Post-it and markers or pencils to *swiftly* contribute to the classroom word charts, timelines, and so on. These types of visuals will support the Common Core State Standard of interpreting visual representations of information and realizing how the information contributes to the understanding of a topic. A teaching tool might, for instance, be a card that says, "Abraham Lincoln: President of the United States during the Civil War." Another partnership might add on to this card with a Post-it, saying: "He delivered the Gettysburg Address." Or, on the map, a partnership might dash up and put up a Post-it on Pennsylvania with Lincoln delivering the speech and the words: "The Gettysburg Address was delivered in Gettysburg, PA in 1863."

### *A Note for Those Working with Students Who Struggle*

Some of you might be thinking that your students would benefit from a second round of reading through these specialized text sets. For instance, it might be helpful for students to try this work again with a new text set. Students who read about politics and slavery might switch and read through the Slavery and Children text set. Reinforcing what they learned during the teaching roundtables might be just the thing students need to retain the new information. Remember, this is not a writing-intensive part. You are pushing students in these early, collective inquiry stages to get a lot of reading done. Thereby, they cover a lot of content, using talk and presentation as the major ways to internalize and learn the content. Writing about reading has an important place in the following parts.

## Part Two: Becoming Specialists and Reading as Researchers— Synthesizing, Analyzing, and Exploring Essential Questions in Subtopics

---

In this part, students zoom in on more specialized subjects and work in small groups reading about an aspect of the Civil War—the Union, the Confederacy, the role of women, important leaders and generals, the role of African Americans, or significant battles. This part will begin simply by reading in their new reading bin or text set. There are a few helpful things to push in the first couple days of this part. First, review your conference and small-group notes, as well as your minilessons from the first part. There may be reading strategies that kids need to be retaught or lessons you did not get to. This would be a perfect time to teach or reteach. Second, we want to build up the support for generating meaningful, powerful, potential essential questions. The Common Core State Standards emphasize the importance of short research projects that build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic. The generation of questions and pursuit of answers in this part will support these skills. To begin this questioning work, students can and should be annotating the text, writing their initial thoughts, reactions, and questions on Post-its. However, it's at this point that you'll want to nudge kids to begin focusing and revising their questions to become springboards into inquiry. Some of you have been laying the groundwork for questioning and categorizing information in your past units. Informally assess your students—are they familiar with the practice of looking over their notes, seeing what larger categories emerge and questions they could pursue? If this is the case, you should take out some of the charts the class did earlier in the year to remind students of this work.

Questions are at the base of developing a strong research practice. The art of posing and perusing questions as a research practice is worth revisiting and definitely teaching. You'll find that students will often begin with basic questions, like "What is this?" "What just happened?" or "Why is this happening?" Stephanie Harvey and Harvey Daniels call these "definition questions," important foundational questions for kids to begin using during their initial research process. Students then parlay the answers to these questions into more developed questions, like "Why does this matter?" or "What difference does this make?" or "What parts are important to explore?" Harvey and Daniels refer to these types of questions as "consequence questions." This differentiation is really helpful for you, giving you a lens of how to gauge the level of questioning happening in your classroom and guidance to teach into more developed questions.

You might think of developing a visual way to show the development of a question. For instance, you might notice a student's annotations beginning with a question like, "What is a station?" Then, upon finding out a station referred to a safe house or places of safety and temporary refuge where slaves hid along the escape route, the question developed into "Why were stations secretive or hidden?" Further evolution of this question led the reader to ask and find answers to questions like, "What risks

were involved in managing a station? What happened to those who got caught? How were stations critical to the Underground Railroad?" This is one possibility to teach students to take hold and guide their own reading and research process. Encourage them to continue generating and refining questions as they read and collect more information about their subtopic during these first few days of this part. Remember, students are in groups, trying this work on their own group's subtopics. That is to say, one group might be working with the subtopic of the role of women, whereas another group is working on important leaders and generals.

When there is some reading, questioning, and researching momentum built in small groups, you might begin to notice some trends in the types of questions students are generating and finding answers to in their reading. You'll either set up students to collaborate with another group, sharing their best questions, looking for possible overlap or themes, or you might model this for the class by saying something like, "Class, I must stop you because I found the coolest thing when reading through your notes! I'm realizing that many of you are pursuing similar types of questions. For instance, I've noticed that three groups are all researching big types of conflicts that arose, while these two groups are all wondering about systems that communities used to survive. This makes me realize that we might want to combine forces and come up some essential questions—questions that we all want to read and research for as we read about our subtopics." You might build a chart of some sample essential questions like:

- What was daily life like during this time?
- What systems of government were in place?
- Why did big conflicts arise, and what can we learn from them?
- How did people resolve their grand conflicts?
- What is the legacy of the events of this period on people's lives since then?
- What does "freedom" really mean?

Teach your students how readers use those types of essential questions to guide research. Teach your researchers to return to their books, reading now to develop more knowledge about the essential questions the classroom is researching. What's great about this kind of study is that it helps young readers sort out significance as they read. Students will be reading as researchers, specifically reading closely, determining importance, and synthesizing information to create explanations to questions. You'll teach readers to carry an essential question in the forefront of their mind as they read and collect important information. Readers might work with a partner laying

out all the possible facts that might help address or explore a question, wondering how they all fit together. You'll teach readers to look across several possible explanations or answers to their questions, thinking, writing, or talking about what big idea or theme connects these possible explanations together. Of course, as they read, they may decide to add to the essential questions and expand the scope of the classroom inquiry—or they may decide that one question is too broad, and you'll teach them how to create smaller, more focused questions.

A predictable problem that may arise during this part is that students may need to break apart what they are reading to collection information around their essential questions. Teach readers when learning something new, it's helpful to think about the categories the information fits into. When readers learn information, it's important to think about the whole topic, while also thinking about the smaller parts within the whole topic. Then, this might help gather information about those smaller parts. For example, a group might be exploring the essential question, "How did people resolve their grand conflicts?" As this group explores this question, they might break it apart into smaller parts, like types of conflicts or levels of conflict or even effects of conflict. Then, group members might take on one of these smaller parts to read and research, rather than the essential question in its entirety.

At this point in the unit, kids will be reading a lot. This is a good thing, a great thing, especially for this time of year. By the nature of reading like a researcher, your students may not be reading each text in their bin from beginning to end. Rather, they are pouring over multiple texts, collecting information from a lot of different sources. The Common Core State Standards remind us that students need to learn this process of gathering relevant information through multiple print and digital sources, as well as draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. Some students will soar with this type of reading, while others might get overwhelmed. Teach kids the powerful tool of signal words—*all, most, few, but*—these words almost always indicate important information for readers. This means, as kids are reading potentially at a quicker pace than usual, they can be on the lookout for those words as cues of when to slow down and take note.

Additionally, maximize the fact that students are working collaboratively in this unit. Have students stop and share often, processing the information they are collecting and learning about the essential question they are pursuing. Many teachers find it very helpful to remind or teach partners or groups to make quick lists of information, describe an important scene, explain something using a boxes-and-bullets structure to organize the information, discuss a specific cause-and-effect relationship, or explore the dynamics of a topic by comparing and contrasting.

One last note about the questioning process: teachers have found great success when modeling their own reading and research process, generating their own questions as they read. We put the highest regard on modeling our own reading and writing for our students; Harvey and Daniels remind us of the importance of modeling your own research process, including modeling your own curiosity and pursuing your own questioning. Carry this modeling beyond the content-area study—demonstrate

this inquiry process in other subject areas or even everyday occurrences. Begin a mini-lesson by saying, “You know class, I’ve been wondering what all the orange flags mean that have been recently put in, lining the sidewalk outside my house. I’m especially interested in this because the flags go right past my favorite old tree that my grandfather planted years and years ago. I’m worried about it! Can’t you see why? So I did a little research. . . .” You might bring out a printout from a recent Google search or perhaps a book that you checked out from the library on urban planning and preservation. Or even an informal transcript of an interview you did with a worker who was putting down flags in another part of the neighborhood. Examples like these model how natural and curious the research process can be for people. It also models the quick, on-the-run, responsive research the Common Core State Standards highlight.

As your students embark on their research, you may wish to return to prior units, such as the nonfiction reading unit or even the content-area calendar, to see if there are any particular strategies that you want to reinforce with small groups of readers. Continue to give students time to read, to talk to their partners, and to share some of what they’ve learned with other students. They’ll probably no longer be putting as much up on the walls of the classroom, because they’ll be busy filling their notebooks with the Post-its and notes they’re jotting as they read. You may find it helpful to reteach some quick note-taking strategies, including boxes-and-bullets, tables and charts, timelines, and labeled drawings. You’ll also want to revisit how readers use their strategies for narrative and expository texts, to read across hybrid texts that contain features of multiple genres. This is of the utmost importance, especially due to the nature of the amount and variety they’ll be reading. Show how you look across a page and synthesize the information you gain from the captions, the sidebars, and the main text. The specification of students’ research will align with many of the Common Core State Standards for information reading. Students will integrate information from several texts on the same topic and will draw on information from multiple print or digital sources.

### **Part Three: Connecting the Past with the Present—Exploring Point of View and Perspective of Texts When Forming Ideas and Theories**

---

The big message of work inside this third part is for students to realize that when readers arrive at new, bigger understandings of the world, we are no longer the same as we once were. The goal is for the new content to not simply wash over your students, easily forgotten, but rather that it is internalized and carried into new understandings. Therefore, there is an extension of the synthesis work from the previous bend, where students take a more analytical stance.

One way to read more analytically is to study different perspectives in texts. This important critical and interpretive work is supported throughout the Common Core State Standards. We first might teach students that all texts have a perspective, a point

of view the text represents. For instance, *Brother's War*, by Patricia Hermes, tells the story of Melody and Marshall, two cousins sharing their sides of the story at the start of the Civil War. Melody's family sides with the Union, while Marshall's family supports the Confederacy. These opposing perspectives allow the reader of the text a different side of the story, thereby supporting the construction of a new layer of meaning to that moment in history. Questions that help students access this concept are "Whose voice is heard? Whose voice is not heard? Which people are represented most in this text? Which people are left out most often in this text? Which side of the story do you hear more about? Which side of the story are you left wondering about?" Survey your students. If students lack a background in this type of critical reading work, you might begin with an activity that helps students clearly see different perspectives that texts carry. You might choose texts that deal with a different time period altogether to teach this crucial lesson. For example, you might use *Encounter*, by Jane Yolen, telling the story of Christopher Columbus' landing from the point of view of a young Taino boy, as well as a retelling of Columbus' expedition from the 1950s and 2000s, or perhaps an article on Columbus from a site like *Facing History*, a nonprofit organization with the mission to provide a well-rounded, multicultural transmission of historical events. Reading different versions of similar historical events is a helpful entry point to begin critical reading.

You'll support this work in your read-aloud and minilessons, emphasizing reading across texts to compare information, perspective, and point of view. You might, for instance, compare primary sources on the Battle of Gettysburg, imagining the different points of view that are represented in the texts, as well as the perspectives that are left out. Help your students to notice, for example, that few of the texts in our classrooms take the side of the South, and encourage them to wonder why that is. Show them how to use or find other resources that help them find out the other side of the story. Empower students to find the answers to these questions in multiple ways: They could ask another group, ask a librarian, scour other books, research using an online search engine, or interview another adult, like a history teacher. The most important part of this work is to model how to lead this type of curious reading life and care about finding out the whole truth.

You might then teach how you ponder not just the information presented in multiple texts but also the feelings that are instilled by the stories and images you encounter. For example, by now some readers in your room will know a lot about significant people in your chosen time period. Let's imagine one group of readers has become quite knowledgeable about Abraham Lincoln. Teach readers to read between the lines, tracking the feelings these stories instill in us as readers. Is Abraham Lincoln portrayed as flawless or always the hero? Does the author show the political motivations, as well as the personal incentives that motivated Lincoln to go to war? Teach readers to step back from their reading and notes to ask, "How am I left feeling about this person? This topic? Am I left with an extremely positive or negative feeling? Do I suspect that I'm missing a part of the picture?" As students are reading through text sets, teach them that as they begin to read each new text, they make sure they are



comparing it to ones they've already read. What new information does each text offer? What new perspectives are included? Does any group of people continue to be left out, to not be represented? This type of analytical reading work will fuel productive, meaningful conversations in your research groups.

You might be tempted to end this part here, excited to launch into the teaching portion of this unit. We invite you to stay a few days more, teaching kids how to make connections between the past and the present. This is a time when students can reflect on previous time periods studied in class and examine how patterns emerge, specifically the patterns of points of view. For instance, look for connections between groups of people who were for or against change. People who feared losing power if things changed versus people who embraced shifts in power so that others could be heard or represented. Show how this was true during the American Revolution, again now during the Civil War, again during the civil rights movement, and currently in today's American society. Go on an academic scavenger hunt, looking for bigger ideas that people struggle with across multiple time periods—power, representation, justice, discrimination, or fairness. Imagine the timelines in your classrooms. Instead of factual, event-based timelines, this is the perfect time to move into idea-based timelines, showing how ideas have changed or repeated over time.

This is one of the highlights of this unit, where students are making connections, moving back and forth between time periods where they see these ideas and concepts reemerge and repeat throughout. Readers will be comparing and contrasting, writing and discussing similarities and differences between different time periods or groups of people. Some of you might return to having students “speaking like essayists,” talking about big ideas of a time period and showing support gathered from their research. Others of you might take a more persuasive approach, where students read with an argument in mind, thinking about points and counterpoints they could make if debating the issue with a partner. All of this is most likely notebook work or research-group-talk work in direct preparation for the final part.

## **Part Four: Building and Presenting Knowledge to Others—Teaching Others with New Knowledge Gained**

---

As your researchers become experts, they'll be eager to share what they've learned and the ideas they have about all the new information they know. Students might, then, begin to turn their research into writing projects, or you might imagine small-group or class-wide projects. The content-area writing unit that parallels this unit includes detailed plans and ideas for how students can use writing to reflect, synthesize, and teach the new content being learned.

One possibility is that students make nonfiction books that you can add to your library, on the subjects they find fascinating. They already know how to write information books, articles, essays, and historical fiction. Here, taking the structure of some of the DK Readers or the Rosen Primary Source books, for instance, as models,

students might write their own books, which incorporate information, images, and narratives. Teach your writers, for instance, how the information they present often seems neutral and how the images and stories may implicitly create an angle on their subject. For instance, if they create a book on Stonewall Jackson, they might present the dates of his life or a timeline of his achievements. Then they might make a drawing of him in the midst of battle. Then they might include a story about the day his name changed to Stonewall. Then maybe they even have an afterward, with a timeline that continues with end of the war or beyond. This is an opportunity for your researchers to use everything they know about reading and writing, to stir up feelings as well as inform, as they share the parts of history they find most compelling. According to the Common Core State Standards, it's important for students to present and share their accumulated knowledge and ideas with others.

You may prefer for students to share their new understandings through social studies projects such as acting out important scenes, narrating why a given moment is important in American history. Or perhaps students have a symposium where they present on the issues of the Civil War and Reconstruction that still affect us today. Students could take a world approach and use film, picture books, and articles to compare the Civil War to other wars that have happened around the world.

You'll need to make an important choice in this final part—will this synthesis of research and information be more *informative* or more *idea-based*? That is to say, the presentation of this research could be a straightforward presentation of research, like a piece of writing detailing the effects of the Civil War on the reconstruction of the South. Or the presentation of this research could be more idea-based, like a piece of writing proclaiming Harriet Tubman to be the most influential leader in the Underground Railroad movement. If a more idea-based approach is taken, it opens up the doors of debate, where students weave together points and counterpoints. Look across your year, as well as the past few years of the students' writing units—how many units have been more informative, like all-about books, and how many units have been more persuasive or idea-based, like literary essays? Many of you will decide to angle this part to be more idea-based to expose students to the opportunity of writing about new content rich with ideas and thoughts. Others of you may need to provide an opportunity for students to learn and practice how to research and present findings in a strictly informative way. The Common Core State Standards push students to draw on evidence to support analysis, reflection, and research. Either option aligns nicely with this new research standard.

One additional note: whichever opportunity you choose, keep in mind the importance of mentor texts as students write. If your unit takes a more idea-based turn, have lots of feature or investigative articles from youth periodicals available, like *Weekly Reader*, *Time for Kids*, or *National Geographic for Kids*. If your unit takes a more informative turn, writers like Seymour Simon are helpful to have on hand.

## Additional Resources

---

As you approach this unit, it will be important for you to read the entire write-up, not just the teaching points below, because ultimately kids learn through the work they do, not the words out of your mouth. So the really important thing in a unit of study is that you have created opportunities for kids to engage in work that matters. The unit write-up can help you issue the wide, generous invitation that rallies kids not only to work with heart and soul but to also engage in deliberate practice, trying to get better at specific skills that the unit aims to highlight. But in the end, a good portion of your teaching will revolve around the responsive instruction you provide as you move kids along trajectories of skill development. This part of your teaching relies on you assessing your students often—not in big fancy ways, but by watching the work they do—and you seeing their work as feedback on your teaching. If you have taught something and only a handful of kids are able to do that work to good effect, then you'll want to decide whether that skill was essential, whether you want to reteach it in a new way, or whether you want to detour around it. You'll want to become accustomed to fine-tuning your teaching through an attentiveness to student work, because the work your students do is not just showing you what they *can* do and *can't* do, it is also showing you what *you* can do. From this attentiveness to student work and from your own persistence to reach students, one way or another, and your inventiveness in response to what they do, you'll find that your teaching itself becomes a course of study for you as well as for your students.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

---

### **Part One: Forming a Research Community and Reading to Build Rich Background Knowledge**

- “Researchers read fairly quickly, trying to get a broad overview of the topic; the important ideas, events, and people; the biggest conflicts; and also important vocabulary.”
- ▮ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Readers use tools like maps and timelines to help orient ourselves and others in our study. These can be collaborative efforts to which we all add as we gather knowledge. When you learn about a big important topic, you may want to use a Post-it with a quick note about the event to add to our class timeline.”
- “Researchers look for places, names, events, and vocabulary that appear in more than one text. Researchers push themselves to read a lot about their topic, especially at first, stopping sometimes to mark information that might be important, and then they go on and read more.”

- “Today I want to teach you that researchers use our research community to help us break down big topics. Researchers find that some topics, like government, are so incredibly complex that it often helps to focus in on one subtopic, using all their nonfiction strategies to find out as much as they can about their one area of expertise.”
- “Researchers pay attention to dates that are listed in the beginning of chapters or paragraphs because they know that they often signify important moments in time. As you read, search for dates as places in the text to reread and gather important information.”
  - ▮ *Teaching share:* “Researchers hold ‘roundtables’ to teach others about their specialized topic. Research teams send representatives from their group to spread the knowledge they have gathered about their specific area of study.”

## **Part Two: Becoming Specialists and Reading as Researchers— Synthesizing, Analyzing, and Exploring Essential Questions in Subtopics**

- “Researchers get to know more about their specialized topics by asking meaningful, powerful questions that can be followed to gain a deeper understanding of our study. One way we come up with questions we can pursue into inquiry is by looking back into our notes, seeing what patterns and categories we notice.”
- “Researchers don’t just ask ‘definition questions,’ the type of questions we ask to orient ourselves as we are first getting to know a topic. As we read deeper, we start asking questions that get at the core of the motivations and consequences of the events we study. We may ask ourselves, ‘Why does this matter?’ or ‘What difference does this make?’ or ‘What parts are important to explore?’”
  - ▮ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Class, I must stop you because I found the coolest thing when reading through your notes! I’m realizing that many of you are pursuing similar types of questions. For instance, I’ve noticed that three groups are all researching big types of conflicts that arose, while these two groups are all wondering about systems that communities used to resolve conflicts. This makes me realize that we might want to combine forces and come up some essential questions—questions that we all want to read and research for as we read about our subtopics.”
- “Today I want to teach you that once researchers have developed essential questions that really get at the meat of their studies, we can return to our books, reading now to develop more knowledge about the essential questions we’ve developed. Researchers carry our essential question in the forefront of

our minds as we read, collecting important information to flesh out our answers.”

- *Teaching share:* “Researchers work with partners, laying out all the possible facts that might help address or explore a question, analyzing together how these pieces all fit together.”
- “Researchers look across several possible explanations or answers to their questions, thinking, writing, or talking about what big idea or theme connects these possible explanations together. They look at their explanations, thinking, ‘What patterns do I see in my proposed answers? What more does this tell me about the big ideas and themes of the topic of my study?’ ”
- *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “One way researchers help ourselves learn new information is by breaking down our essential questions into smaller parts so that we can more thoroughly understand all the elements that go into answering our big questions. Members in our research groups may each pursue a different part of the big question, later sharing information with each other to more fully come to conclusions about our inquiries.”
- *Small group:* “One powerful tool we have to help us find the most important information is signal words. Words like *all*, *most*, *few*, and *but* almost always indicate important information. As you read, be on the look out for those words as cues to slow down and take note.”

### **Part Three: Connecting the Past with the Present—Exploring Point of View and Perspective of Texts When Forming Ideas and Theories**

- “Today I want to teach you that one way to read more analytically, more deeply, about a topic is to study different perspectives in texts. Depending on whose point of view is expressed in a text, the topic or story is bound to be told in a different way. Researchers read across texts, asking in each, ‘Whose voice is heard? Whose voice is not heard? Which side of the story do you hear more about? Which side of the story are you left wondering about?’ As we sense different voices from text to text, we will likely find out not just part of a story, but instead, something closer to the whole truth.”
- *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “I noticed something interesting in the books in our classroom. Looking across the texts, there are certain voices that aren’t really expressed in many of our books. One thing that researchers do as we critically read is ask ourselves, ‘Are there are certain voices that are frequently heard and some that aren’t? Why do certain voices continually get left out?’ ”

- “History isn’t just facts and information. Researchers don’t simply read for information. Rather, researchers are often moved by the feelings that are drawn out by the stories and images we encounter. As we read, we step back from all those names and dates, and ask, ‘How am I left feeling about this person or topic? Am I left with an extremely positive or negative feeling? Do I suspect that I’m missing part of the picture?’ In answering these questions, researchers find themselves with a much deeper understanding of the truth about a topic.”
  - *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Researchers sometimes read with an argument in mind, thinking about points and counterpoints they could make if debating the issue with a partner. This can serve two purposes. First, it may help prepare a researcher to talk with a partner. Second, it will give you a purpose or focus while you are reading.”
- “Have you ever heard the expression, ‘History repeats itself’? Today I want to teach you that researchers realize there are patterns in history, specifically patterns of points of view, and we ask ourselves, ‘What big ideas keep popping up in history and in modern times? What struggles do people continue to have? How have ideas about those struggles changed or stayed the same?’ Thinking about those struggles and people’s attitudes toward those struggles can help you think about what actions you want to take to solve big social issues.”
  - *Teaching share:* “When we share our ideas about the important concepts of a topic, one way we can express ourselves clearly is by ‘speaking like essayists.’ Talk, first, about the main idea or theme you have noticed. Then, support that idea with evidence you have gathered from your research.”





## UNIT NINE

# Option 1—Historical Fiction or Fantasy Fiction

## JUNE

---

For this month, you have a choice to teach either the “Author Study: *Reading Like a Fan*” unit or to teach the historical fiction or fantasy unit that you did not choose in January. The write-ups and teaching points for both historical fiction and fantasy reading can be found in Unit Five of this curricular calendar. If you do choose to teach either of these at this time, you may want to opt for the parallel unit in writing workshop. If you decide to teach the author study, we recommend you angle the unit so that you are giving your students opportunities to get to know mentor texts and genre conventions in the genre that you’re teaching in writing workshop.



## UNIT NINE

# Option 2 — Author Study

## *Reading Like a Fan*

JUNE

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: U/V)

*A note to teachers who are teaching historical fiction or fantasy fiction this month in writing workshop: You may choose to teach the same genre of fiction during reading workshop this month. Write-ups of both of these genre club units can be found in Unit Five of this curricular calendar. If you choose to teach this unit alongside a genre fiction writing unit, we recommend that you angle your read-aloud work, especially early in the unit, toward the genre the students will be writing in. You will want to introduce them to the genre in reading as well as in writing.*

Reading workshop, as envisaged by this curriculum, is not a “subject” that kids learn at school. Instead, it addresses a habit of life that twines itself in and out of school hours, that affects our young people’s thinking, that grows well into adulthood and old age. Reading workshop, at its very heart, aims to set young people on the path to becoming life-long readers. But what about the youngsters who come into our rooms preconditioned into believing that they aren’t great “readers?” Despite our best intentions, they fail to grasp the “habits” of “real” readers, they can’t really remember the books they read recently, they have no “next must-read” lined up in their mind, and they often leave books unfinished. Of course, these are the students who probably need our help with decoding and synthesizing, who perhaps haven’t found enough books to engage them at their just-right levels. They might even need our help with phonics still. But far deeper than all these mechanics, perhaps these youngsters don’t even think of themselves as readers. They may be hovering on the

periphery of our inner circle, never really identifying with whatever it is that makes *other* students passionate, nose-in-book, lost-to-the-world readers. At this point in the year, you likely have these students first and foremost on your mind. “There’s not much time left,” you might be thinking. “Is there another way I might be able to reach them?”

In this unit of study, you’ll stretch your arms wide and gather *all* your youngsters into the inner circle. Whatever their level and previous success with reading, in this unit, your students will recarve their identities as readers. Specifically, they will identify one book, one writer, who speaks to them—and use this power to leverage themselves into becoming experts and insiders on everything this author has written and also everything this author stands for. This is work that all students can do. It is a powerful thing for a child to be able to say, “Oh, my favorite author is so-and-so.” Just name-dropping a favorite author is a way to hitch oneself (no matter how superfluously) to the “literary world.” It is even more powerful for this youngster to be able to tell you precisely why this author is special, to be able to list titles by this author, to perhaps comment on how this author has changed his way of living and seeing the world.

Of course, you may already have a few “author experts” in the room and in your life. One is a master on all-things-Dahl or all-creatures-Tolkien, or practically lives in Narnia. Another can rattle off everything Cleary’s ever written, verbally ticking off the titles she’s read and also the ones she’s waiting anxiously to find and read. Note that it is only the more exceptional authors who command such loyalty—and it is usually our strongest readers who make up this ardent fan-base. This unit of study hopes to tap into some of the power of knowing, loving, and studying an author’s work, of eagerly anticipating reading another work by this author, of becoming enriched by the craft (and life-) lessons this author’s books provide. This work will pull students firmly into forging personal literary connections, a unique personal literary identity, by attaching their own name with that of an author who speaks to them. And with our help, this is work that our strugglers—not just the few strongest ones in the room—can begin to do.

It is also worth noting that the placement of this unit at the end of the year was purposeful. We are hoping that by setting up students to develop (or become) lovers of particular authors, we will set the stage for voracious reading over the summer. In the weeks left in the school year students can’t possibly read all of their favorite authors’ books. We can, however, whet our students’ appetites and set them up with at least one focused game plan for their independent reading over their summer vacations.

As you start this final month, bear in mind that this is your last chance to provide readers with support moving up levels of text difficulty. Although you no doubt feel like you are ready to wind down your teaching, this is actually the month in which you are sending kids off to a summer of practice. So now is the perfect time to help students who are ready to break into another level of text difficulty. You know how to do this—put them in transitional baggies, provide text introductions and same-book partners. Support some of the new vocabulary that readers will encounter. But the

real job is probably more around motivation. After all, kids will be entering a new grade next year. With a final push, they can enter that grade reading at a whole different level. And think about the texts that will become accessible to them as a result of this final push! You'll absolutely want to do the book talks/book buzzes that create excitement around the newly accessible books, using the social energy of kids who've loved those books to energize this final push.

## Preparing Text Sets and Setting Up Clubs

---

This month, no mere one-hit publishing wonder and no ordinary author will do. You'll want to pick the strongest, the bestselling, and the most popular of authors to anchor this unit in. Several names pop into mind: Gary Paulsen, Jacqueline Woodson, James Howe, Gary Soto, Patricia MacLachlan, Patricia Reilly Giff, Clyde Robert Bulla, Walter Dean Myers, Suzanne Collins, Laurence Yep, Judy Blume. This could be a very long and varied list. The determining factors are the students in your room. We recommend that you mine your library for the titles that have proved most popular in the preceding months. It is also a good idea to ask your kids outright. Distribute slips of paper for them to write the title of the one or two books that they've loved the most, or the authors they'd love to see more of, and use these ballots for guidance on the text sets you'll make.

Take your students' interests into account. Do some of your boys crave Gary Paulsenesque adventure stories and sulk through slower-paced, relationship-oriented stories? Might some girls love to come together to talk formally about Judy Blume's plotlines? Do you have a few philosophers who can unpeel several interpretive layers off a Patricia MacLachlan novel? Keep your students' faces in mind while handpicking the authors around which you create a text set of books. While creating text sets, you'll want to watch out for reading levels. One advantage is that some authors, such as Gary Paulsen, have written books at a variety of levels that can support a range of readers. Paulsen titles include *Worksong* (J), *Dogteam* (P), *Hatchet* (R), *The Winter Room* (U), and *Sarny* (W). You will notice that in addition to writing at many levels, Paulsen also has a variety of books at each level. You might choose to have two separate text sets for Gary Paulsen to cater to two clubs reading at separate levels—or even make the bold move of putting different-leveled readers in the same Paulsen club. The latter would require enough Paulsen books to hold everyone's interest across the month. This uneven pairing of different levels might even pull some students up into a higher level since they'll have more proficient peers with whom to discuss and interpret a shared author. Or it may backfire and frustrate readers who are used to reading and interpreting at disparate levels! These are calculated risks that only you, with your knowledge of your particular students, can make. We recommend that you monitor club progress closely to offset such problems before they bloom full fledged, matching readers who can support each other in multiple ways throughout the month's work.

Try to keep no more than four students per club. If half the class opts fervently for the same favorite author, you might create two different clubs for this one author alone, helping the two clubs swap books after they have read and discussed them, perhaps later asking these clubs to come together to compare notes. As much as is possible, match readers to their first author choice or make informed, carefully weighed decisions about placing a reader in a particular club, putting the reader's taste preference at the forefront of this decision.

## Sequence of the Unit

---

This unit begins with getting to know an author, by reading or rereading one or two books by this author. Many musicians, particularly hip-hop musicians, discuss how important it was to their development as music lovers and later music-makers to listen to a particular song over and over again until they know it by heart. Most musicians talk about writing the lyrics to the song and memorizing them—all as a way to get to know the song from the outside-in. One way readers can do this same work is to study particular aspects of the book they are currently reading and how these aspects might in fact be hallmarks of this author's body of work. Readers might note the settings and the characters this author creates and also note whether the problems the characters face in one book feel similar to those faced by characters in his or her other books.

The second part will push readers into noting and naming specific craft moves that this author makes, apprenticing themselves to this author's craft and use of language. By the third part, your readers will have read many books by this author as well as texts about the author and will be in a better position to compare and contrast across texts. At this stage, clubs can begin to analyze themes that recur in this author's books and also to begin creating an evaluation of the bigger life messages that the author seems to forward in every book. In the final part, students will end on a somewhat introspective note, with each individual reader exploring why he or she gravitates to one particular author over another and noting ways in which a favorite author's work moves and shapes his or her own thinking about a particular subject. With that author's work firmly in the reader's grasp, the students will then make plans to move forward into the summer, using everything they've learned about reading to prepare for a summer filled with passionate and connected reading.

## Part One: When Readers Read More Than One Book by the Same Author, We Come to Know that Author

---

How does one really get to know an author? Flocks throng to see Hans Christian Andersen's Copenhagen house, tourists seek out and touch the bronze of Lewis Carroll's Alice sitting on a mushroom in Central Park, and Harry Potter figurines are

purchased by doting aunts for their Rowling-obsessed nieces and nephews. This, however, is not the stuff an author study is made of. Nor does one really get to know an author by mining biographical trivia. Think about it: would the knowledge that Steinbeck married thrice really increase one's appreciation for *Of Mice and Men*? To become an expert on an author, we don't need to visit their shrine or hometown, or even really to interview them. To really become an expert on an author, readers devour as many books by that author as they can lay their hands on. We read and reread favorite parts, underline the lines that make us laugh aloud or stop to think again. This is the message you'll want to begin this unit on author studies with, teaching clubs to simply read and reread books that their favorite author has written.

This will mean different things for different readers. For readers who launch into this study having read only a single book by this author, you might suggest that they start off by *rereading* the one book that they do know. Other readers might decide because they all know different books to choose a new one together, perhaps with familiar characters, that they will study closely, looking for this author's fingerprints.

As is often the case for fans, one of the first steps we want to teach our students to take as readers, whether this is their first book by this author or their twenty-first, is to allow themselves to marvel at the craft and the story. You will teach your students to stop and take notice when they find themselves laughing out loud, gasping with excitement, brushing away a tear, or in other ways impressed by their author. We want the students to allow themselves to fall in love with their authors. They will come to their club meetings with favorite moments, sentences, even words marked and ready to linger and gush over.

Once readers are immersed in their stories and enamored with their authors, call their attention to the setting and the characters. "Readers get to know an author by paying attention to the settings the author creates in his or her books. 'What is the world of the story?' we ask ourselves. 'Does this author always create this same world?'" And later, "We get to know an author well by understanding the hero of the story. Who is this character? Is this hero like the hero or heroine in another book by this author? We pay attention to the characters that our author creates." In their club conversations, each child might report on the setting and the characters in his or her book and together, the club can begin to compare these. The Patricia MacLachlan Club, who might be all reading or have read different MacLachlan books, for example, might be asking, "Do the stories *Journey* and *Sarah, Plain and Tall* both take place on a farm? How is the setting for *Edward's Eyes* different from these? How is it the same?" The three students reading these books will each be in a position to comment on whatever their book reveals about this common author. Similarly, the Barbara Parks Club who are all reading the same books might be pondering, "Is Alex from *Skinny Bones* similar at all to Howard from *The Boy in the Red Jacket*? How are Alex and Howard similar to or different from Maxie?"

Do not expect clubs to come up with "correct" or insightful answers—asking these questions is important to forging a literary awareness of the author as a "craftsman," one who molds and shapes characters and settings in specific ways. You might coach



clubs into noting whether the setting feels like today's world or a different country, these times or historical times, familiar kinds of people or people that feel different from readers' own world, and for readers to compare if this is true for every book they're reading in that club. Of course, setting and characters are only two such lenses that will help direct students' gazes at their author's books. Depending on what your students have studied and been fascinated by this year, you might return to those lenses, even pulling out old charts during mid-workshop teaching points and teaching shares, to encourage students to note more and still more about the work their author is doing in their current books and in the books they know from the past.

As students read more, you might suggest they continue to collect their favorite or most admired parts of the books they are reading, just as they did in the first days of the unit. Students could return to Post-its on specific parts that make them laugh aloud or feel particularly sad or parts that make them feel like something is about to happen that will twist the story in an unexpected direction. In clubs, they may ponder, "Do all our books have parts that make us laugh? Is this author funny in every story?" Or "Three readers in this club have noted that all seems well at the start and then the story begins to change and everything goes wrong at once. This seems to be true in many books by this author."

For clubs to come up with such observations, they will need coaching from you. Listen in as readers talk in clubs. Most of them will merely be retelling the story till the point that they've read so far. Nudge club members into asking more analytic questions. It is worth remembering that one of the main thrusts of this unit is to get students to think deeply about their author's work to become more passionate and informed readers. Retelling will certainly not reach that goal. We want to teach students to have the kinds of conversations that books lovers have on a regular basis. It might help you to think of the last book you read and were dying to talk about with other people. What did you want to talk about? How did that talk change when the person had read the book too? Did you discuss themes? Exciting moments? Deeper understanding of the text? Another way to push readers into looking deeper than the literal plotline of their books is to nudge them into noting decisions that must have gone into developing this plotline. For example, we might teach students that they may note and compare the story's pacing: "Is there a lot of action in this story? Does this story literally begin with action? Is there a lot of dialogue? Do things happen quickly or is the story slow-paced and full of descriptions of the setting? Does the story make me have questions right from the start?" Nudge them into noting whether the author tends to make them grip the edge of their seat with worry—and if this is true of every club member's book.

## Part Two: When We Read Many Books by an Author We Love, We Apprentice Ourselves to that Author's Craft

---

Without even knowing that we're doing this, humans tend to mimic whatever we love. This is especially true for kids. They'll talk like their parents, dress like their best friends, and even copy moves from us, their teachers—mimicking expressions or actions they find the most effective or enticing. It isn't as easy for a child to mimic a beloved author while writing, however, or we'd have millions of Roald Dahls. With explicit instruction, however, students can certainly note and name the specific craft moves that favorite authors make—and internalize these when they're thinking, talking, or writing. With practice, they can develop the habit of reading like writers, learning not merely to be wowed but also to pay attention to the science behind the magic trick so that they, too, can create similar magic.

Since this is the reading workshop, you'll want to keep the focus on reading, not writing, but readers can certainly read with a writer's eye even if they don't immediately pen long pages using the techniques they've observed. Certainly the effects of this part's work will spill over into the writing students do in the future, but our specific focus here is to create a life-long habit for students to look at texts the way a mechanic looks at cars—pulling all the pieces apart, then putting them back together to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for how and why it was written. You will want readers to notice how authors might use repetition and symbolism, how they have chosen specific words in their books, and how they might start or end their books or chapters in similar or different ways.

One way we can do this is to teach students to direct their study to different aspects of a text and then devise ways to pull it out of context to compare it with other works from the same author. For example, you might show students how they can use a reverse story booklet or mountain to record the structure of the stories they've read so far and then note how there are structural similarities and differences across an author's books. You might teach students to copy a short section of text that they love from each of the books they've read so far in their reading notebook and to study it for its sentence variation, punctuation, and even word choice. You might also consider teaching students that they can try their hand at writing into the gaps of a story in their reader's notebooks, imagining what happens in the scenes that are not there. What do the characters sound like? What do they do? These kinds of quick exercises will look different depending on the author in question. Clearly the club studying Jon Scieszka will have a different author's style to try than those reading Kate DiCamillo!

Finally, it is worth mentioning that if your students are working on independent writing projects in writing workshop at this time, these authors they are studying could very well serve as mentor authors for their writing pieces. Students can try their hand, even if just experimentally in their notebooks, at trying to write pieces of dialogue or descriptive sections in the style and cadence of their author.

## Part Three: Becoming an Author Expert

---

If Rowling were to release a new book tomorrow, it would be read one way by a Rowling newbie (a reader for whom this may be the first book by this author) and completely differently by a Rowling fan (one who's devoured every Potter and Bard book ever written, several times). While the newbie might read with casual interest, the fan's reading would buzz with cross-text references, with memories of previous Rowling characters and plotlines, with satisfied recognition of familiar craft moves and syntax patterns. This second way of reading is powerful; it is the reading of an expert, a critic. The reader who knows an author can recognize this author's voice and style immediately, much as one recognizes the footfall of a family member in the dark. In this part, you'll aim for readers to become experts on their author.

By this time in the unit, your readers ought to have finished two, if not more, books by their favorite author. They will be in a position to say what the author "tends to do," to connect patterns across the two (or more) books, and to come up with some theory about the themes that this author typically addresses. Of course, clubs will support individual efforts to do this. Teach clubs to look at their books interpretively, to note the deeper undercurrents of what their book is really about. Recall some of the more common literary themes that your students explored in a previous unit of study (Thematic Text Sets) and ask which of these the author tends to revisit. Does the author write about relationships between friends and family members or about something in society at large—a social issue? Does the main character lose one thing but find something else of deeper value—and what is this newfound thing exactly? Is every book a battle between good and evil, or is it about growing up? Or finding the courage within? Or about being resilient and fighting challenges? What is the main character's journey of growth? Once readers unearth the theme in one novel, ask them, "Does the author address the same theme in another book? List all the themes that you see in books by this author. Do any common ones emerge?" Teach readers that they can come up with a theory about the themes their author tends to address, for example, that Paulsen's stories are usually about a boy who grows up, suddenly having to be a man, or that MacLachlan's books often have mothers who die or desert their children in some other way, and these kids have to find that motherly comfort in someone else or something else.

Readers might falter at the start, especially if they can't seem to find a common theme. In *Bridge to Terabithia*, one of the big lessons Katherine Paterson touches on is that we can take lessons we have learned from the people in our lives, even if we lose those people. But in *Lyddie*, Paterson deals mostly with the power one gets from becoming educated and how education can help people escape from bad situations. There might appear to be no common denominator. Nudge your students to look at a third, fourth, and possibly even fifth Paterson book. They may just come away with the realization that Paterson is diverse; she can write about an angry foster child who causes havoc for her latest, loving foster home as well as writing about the Bread and Roses labor strike in 1912. This is fine. But they might discover something in common:

that kids can gain strength from outside of themselves—whether from books or from people—which can help them to become happy and independent. Either way, this club ought to be able to tell you that as diverse as she is, Paterson is immediately recognizable, by style and voice. Ask kids, “If you had to recognize this author’s work from among a pile of many coverless, nameless books, how might you be able to tell his or her voice apart from the rest?” Eventually, readers will be able to piece together a sense of who this author is and also the kind of things this author stands for. For example, the club will tell you that Katherine Paterson might write about a very serious and grown-up theme, but she will always do it in a way that sounds exactly how real kids would act in those situations, and that she doesn’t shy away from issues and topics (death, poverty, social services, labor) that most people think only adults can handle reading about.

Imagine the literary critic who knows an author so well that his or her review of the author’s latest book drips with knowledge of everything the author has ever attempted in the past. Such a critical review might tell you, “This work is typical Rushdie.” Or “With this book, Rushdie has grown as an author, he touches new, previously unexplored themes such as. . . .” Or “This is Rushdie at his most eloquent, surpassing even the vivid imagery he achieved in. . . .” Only the critic who has immersed himself or herself in a thorough study of Rushdie’s work would be able to make claims such as these. By this point in the unit, our students must do no less. As their club conversations build up to form a clear picture of this author’s literary identity, young readers are in a position to tell us if their book is “typical Dahl” or “Dahl at his funniest,” or “Dahl being more disgusting than ever.” You might teach students that “as we go forward in our books, reading an author we know well, we compare everything new we’re reading with older works by this author. We ask ourselves, “What is this author doing that is new? In what way is this part like another part in such-and-such book by him or her?” Everything about the author’s craft, choice of theme, setting, and characterization should feel vaguely familiar to our readers by now, like listening to utterances by someone they know well and can predict certain things about.

## **Part Four: Readers Explore the Deeper Connections that an Author Inspires in Us and Make Future Reading Plans**

---

It is true that reading changes the way we look at the world. Reading Gerald Durrell, the naturalist, might make one forever look at a wall gecko differently, reading Zinsser might mean that we never again write a sentence in quite the same careless way again, and even a *Cosmopolitan* article might alter the way we ever look at stripes and collars. For young readers, a favorite author does far more than entertain with a story. From favorite authors, readers might learn important distinctions between courage and cowardice, callousness and empathy, honor and disgrace. For this last part of work, you might invite readers to pick up pencil and paper and explore the

way in which a favorite author gives us valuable ways of looking at or coping with the world.

Even though this is largely personal, introspective work, club members might still assist each other in exploring the lessons that the author teaches us in one book, or again and again across various books. Urge students to connect these lessons with the issues that they themselves see or face in everyday life.

This work requires students to grow an idea and is therefore quite suited to be a writing task. You might decide to have students pen a quick literary essay explaining their connection to a particular book or particular author. This work can be started out slowly in the reader's notebook as students read and talk in clubs. They might mark the parts of their book that resonate for them and later, jot a quick note about why that particular part of the story spoke to their own life or experience. During club time, they may share these jottings with peers. Or you may choose to replace club time with quiet writing time so that students can flesh out the personal responses that reading invokes in them.

By this point in the unit, not only will your readers know their authors well but they will have also learned about themselves and what it is that connects them to certain authors and certain books. This is the perfect point to start thinking about how students might move forward into the future—in this case, their summer vacations. You will want to teach them that one of the best ways to keep their summer reading lives exciting is to be passionate about whatever it is they plan to read. For many of them, this will mean continuing the work of following their author. You will want to help your students either through the public library, book orders, book swaps, or even loans from the class library to gather enough texts by their authors to keep them busy and engaged in reading for the whole summer. Some teachers, depending on your students and the community your school is in, find that students might even want to set up follow-up book club meetings to be held at the local public library, complete with a summer reading agenda. Other teachers find it fun to set up a special summer reading book baggie, complete with sticky notes and a bookmark that students can crack open on the last day of school. No matter how you decide to wrap up this unit (and the year), it's most important that students feel revved up for their summer reading and not feel as if it's a damper on their summer vacations. As the saying goes, you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

## Additional Resources

---

As you approach this unit, it will be important for you to read the entire write-up, not just the teaching points below, because ultimately kids learn through the work they do, not the words out of your mouth. So the really important thing in a unit of study is that you have created opportunities for kids to engage in work that matters. The unit write-up can help you issue the wide, generous invitation that rallies kids not only to work with heart and soul but to also engage in deliberate practice, trying to get better

at specific skills that the unit aims to highlight. But in the end, a good portion of your teaching will revolve around the responsive instruction you provide as you move kids along trajectories of skill development. This part of your teaching relies on you assessing your students often—not in big fancy ways, but by watching the work they do—and you seeing their work as feedback on your teaching. If you have taught something and only a handful of kids are able to do that work to good effect, then you'll want to decide whether that skill was essential, whether you want to reteach it in a new way, or whether you want to detour around it. You'll want to become accustomed to fine-tuning your teaching through an attentiveness to student work, because the work your students do is not just showing you what they *can* do and *can't* do, but it is also showing you what *you* can do. From this attentiveness to student work and from your own persistence to reach students, one way or another, and your inventiveness in response to what they do, you'll find that your teaching itself becomes a course of study for you as well as for your students.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

---

### **Part One: When Readers Read More Than One Book by the Same Author, We Come to Know that Author**

- “Today I’m going to teach you that when we read, we can become fans of authors—just like we’re music fans and sports fans. When we’re fans of a sports team, we try to see every game. When we’re fans of an author, we try to read every book they’ve written. When we’re fans of musicians, we listen to their songs over and over and memorize every word. When we’re fans of authors, we read their books, sometimes more than once, studying chapters, paragraphs, even sentences until we know them almost by heart. When we’re fans of sports, we replay home runs and touchdowns and fumbles and errors and cheer and gasp over and over again. When we’re fans of authors, we mark our favorite places in books to reread over and share: where we laughed, cried, were surprised.”
- “Today I’m going to teach you that fans don’t just love something—they also become experts at that something. Some of you are baseball fans and know every batting average, every save. As fans of authors, we are going to get to know each of the books we read by our authors very well. We’re going to study every little thing about them. One place we can start that work is by studying the characters in our authors’ books—the way we’ve been studying characters all year—but this time with an admiring gaze.”
- *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Readers, sometimes it helps to revisit old strategies we’ve used before, but with a new twist. The twist this time would be reading like a fan. So, let’s look at one of our old charts from our character unit. Here’s a strategy about looking closely at characters’ actions to understand



them better. Now, as a fan, I might do that—and notice what I admire about either the character or the author’s work in the moment of that action. Like the part where Ramona empties the toothpaste tube into the sink. I know that shows she’s being reckless. *And* I can also admire her creativity as a character and how Beverly Cleary makes her seem so realistic—that’s exactly how a kid would act.”

- “Today I want to teach you that we can go beyond studying characters in one book. We can start looking across books and comparing and contrasting the different characters in different books by the same author. Since, as fans, we are all likely to have read other books by this author (even if not all the same ones as the other people in our club) we can begin doing that work now. We can ask ourselves questions: What does this character want? What are his or her struggles? How are these things similar or different than the characters in other books I’ve read by this author.”
- “Today I want to teach you that we can get to know our authors better in lots of different ways, in addition to focusing on character. We can also look closely at the settings in our authors’ books. We can ask ourselves, ‘What is the world of the story?’ and ‘Does this author always create this same world?’”
- *Possible mid-workshop teaching point:* “Readers, it’s not enough to just notice the settings in the books our authors write. Like, it’s not enough for me to say, ‘Most of the books I’ve read by Gary Soto take place in schools and homes in California.’ I want to think about what this tells me about my author and what his books are really about. Like, since I already know that most of Gary Soto’s characters are Mexican American, it makes sense that California is where the stories take place. But also, many of them live in places that aren’t so wealthy—so I know that can have an effect on how the characters act, the choices they can make, and so on.”

## **Part Two: When We Read Many Books by an Author We Love, We Apprentice Ourselves to that Author’s Craft**

- “Today I want to teach you that another way we can get to know our authors’ books better and, in turn, become even stronger readers, is to not just study the books from the outside in, as readers, but to also study our books with our clubs as writers. We do this when we think about how we’ve structured our own stories in the past and then look to the structures of the books we have read by our authors to see if there are patterns that emerge.”
- *Possible mid-workshop teaching point:* “Readers, a few of you have asked if you can grab your writer’s notebooks and see if you can try out some of the structure moves your author has done. I think that’s a great idea. And not just for

structure. We can do that any time we see something our author is doing that we admire—we can try it out in our own writing right then and there.”

- “Today I want to teach you that another way we can apprentice ourselves to our authors is to pore over those sections and places we have loved and been moved by. We might even copy a short section into our notebooks and study what’s going on here that’s making us be so affected. Is it the situation the character is in? The character’s motivation? Is it sentence variation? Is it word choice? Punctuation? We can then look to other spots in the same book and other books to see if there is evidence of this or other moves the author tends to do a lot in his or her craft.”
- “Today I want to teach you that when readers are looking closely at our authors’ craft, it’s not enough to just name what they are doing and admire it—we want to try to build theories about why they make the choices that they made. Just as builders choose bricks for some buildings and wood for others, we want to think about what the author was trying to do when he or she decided to choose those words, make the setting look that way, include that character. Everything is in a book because an author chose to put it there. Part of the reader’s job is to think about why the author might have made those choices.”
- “Today I want to teach you that in addition to looking closely at what is there in the book, we can use our deep knowledge of our author to fill in the gaps—imagine scenes that are not in the book that could be in the book—as a way of walking in the shoes of the author. We can talk or write these scenes out exactly as we imagine the author would have done.”
- “Today I want to teach you that while we have all been talking about how much studying how an author crafts his or her work can help us to become stronger readers, it is also true that a close eye for an author’s craft can help us as writers. We can occasionally find ourselves marking places in a book not just because it moves us as a reader but because we want to try what the author is doing as a writer in our own writing.”

### **Part Three: Becoming an Author Expert**

- “Today I want to teach you that as experts on your author, you are going to start to turn your careful gaze toward the big issues and themes that tend to run (or not) through an author’s books. Most authors have a few themes that they tend to return to again and again. We can lay out the books that we have read and start to note what themes come up in different books.”

- *Possible teaching share:* “Readers, some of you have realized that one of the reasons you are such a fan of your author is because you have written about or believe in some of the same themes as your author. For example, James Howe writes a lot about the underdog succeeding. I write a lot about that, too. It’s an interesting thing to go back and look back over our writing to see if we share themes in our writing with our authors.”
- “Today I want to teach you that as we begin to understand the themes and topics that our author tends to return to, or write in a lot of the time, we can begin to build a sense of what an author is “known for.” Just as some musicians are known for their outrageous costumes or some athletes for their daring plays, we can begin to say some things about the themes and topics our author tends to use and begin to anticipate how the next books we are planning to read will fulfill or be different than a majority of this author’s work.”
- “Today I want to teach you that we can use our knowledge of an author’s body of work—their topic choice, themes, craft moves, plots, settings and characters—to start to compare and contrast books. ‘*Baby* is classic Patricia MacLaughlin,’ we can say. Or ‘This book is a return to the settings MacLaughlin made famous.’ Or even ‘*Edward’s Eyes* is a different than the usual books we’ve come to expect from MacLaughlin.’”

#### **Part Four: Readers Explore the Deeper Connections That an Author Inspires in Us and Make Future Reading Plans**

- “Today I want to teach you that readers look to the places that resonate for us most and then ask ourselves, “What is it about me that this part of this text is speaking to?” We know that we might not know the answer right away, so it could help to write long about that part or talk to other people about that part to help us figure out what about us connects with the characters or situations we are reading about. These moments can help us to realize there might be some things we care more about than we might have even known.”
- “Today I want to teach you that we can do more than learn about an author’s books and become better readers. We can also learn how to be better humans. We can see what the ideas, issues and lessons the author comes to again and again, and allow those things to seep into our souls. We can see how James Howe has taught us that even if we are underdogs, we can still win. We can see how Jacqueline Woodson has taught us that families don’t have to be a certain way—they just need to be about love. We can uncover those things by revisiting the books we’ve read and asking, ‘What have I learned here? How am I different for having read this book?’”

- “Yesterday we talked about how reading like fans can help us to become better human beings. Today I want to teach you that it can also help us become stronger writers. We can look to our authors to get ideas for our own writing lives. Can we be inspired to write about similar topics? Themes? Genres? Or perhaps we want to try some craft or structural moves we saw our authors try. As we move closer to the summer, we should take some time to imagine our own writing body of work and how our author can continue to guide us.”
- “Today I want to teach you that our love of our authors doesn’t have to stop just because our school year is over. In fact, summer is an even better time for readers because we have even more time for reading! We can gather together books by our authors that we haven’t yet read. We can find new titles by asking our friends, our librarian, or going online and visiting our favorite author’s website. Once we have that list we can begin to collect those books and make a plan for reading them.”

## ADDITIONAL WRITING RESOURCES BY

# Lucy Calkins *and Colleagues* *from the Reading and Writing Project*

***Units of Study for Primary Writing*** provides easy access to the magic of Lucy and her colleagues teaching by presenting minute-by-minute, live-from-the-classroom coaching as they show you how to take children from oral and pictorial story telling into fluent writing.

*Grades K–2* / 978-0-325-00604-8 / 2003 / 9 books + 1 CD-ROM / **\$172.00**

***Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5*** offers crystal-clear advice on how to lead strong, efficient writing workshops in upper-elementary classrooms. Organized within a carefully crafted spiraling curriculum, these six sequential units of study help you teach narrative and expository writing with increasing power and intimacy.

**Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5**

978-0-325-00870-7 / 2006 / 7 books + 1 CD-ROM / **\$172.00**

**SPECIAL OFFER: Calkins Units of Study Bundle**

978-0-325-01284-1 / *Units of Study K–2* + *Units of Study 3–5* / **\$344.00 value for \$309.60**

***Units of Study for Teaching Reading, Grades 3–5*** chronicles the teaching moves and language Lucy and her colleagues use to teach their students how to read with increasing engagement and sophistication. Born out of a community of practice, this series provides a rigorous and responsive course of study for students and powerful and empowering professional development for teachers.

**Units of Study for Teaching Reading, Grades 3–5**

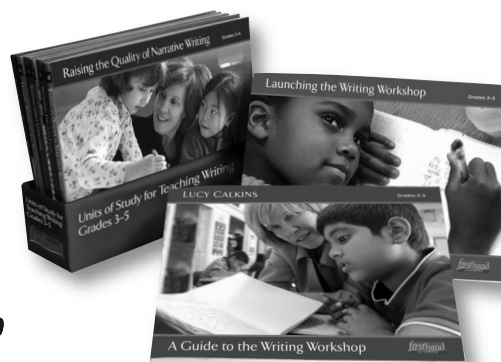
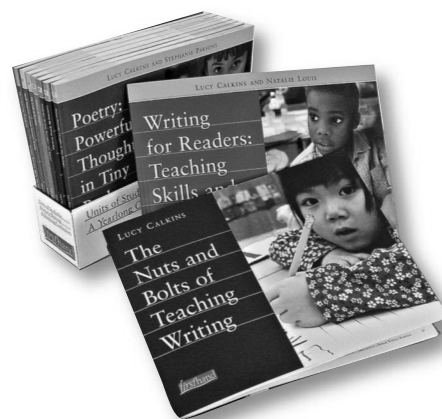
978-0-325-00871-4 / 2010 / 9 books + 2 DVDs + 1 CD-ROM / **\$229.00**

**Units of Study for Teaching Reading Trade Book Pack**

978-0-325-03080-7 / 2010 / 8 Trade Books / **\$60.00**

**SPECIAL OFFER: Units of Study for Teaching Reading Bundle**

978-0-325-03084-5 / 2010 / *UoS* + *Trade Pack* / **\$259.00 — SAVE \$30.00**



To learn more, visit [www.unitsofstudy.com](http://www.unitsofstudy.com)