



COMMON CORE READING & WRITING WORKSHOP

# A CURRICULAR PLAN FOR The Reading Workshop

GRADE  
**6**



LUCY CALKINS AND COLLEAGUES FROM  
THE READING AND WRITING PROJECT





A CURRICULAR PLAN FOR  
**The Reading Workshop**

**Grade 6**

Common Core Reading and Writing Workshop

Lucy Calkins

*and Colleagues from*

*The Reading and Writing Project*



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# Overview of the Year for Sixth-Grade Readers

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SEPTEMBER	Unit 1: Agency and Independence: Launching Reading Workshop with Experienced Readers
OCTOBER	Unit 2: Investigating Characters across Series
NOVEMBER	Unit 3: Nonfiction Reading: Navigating Expository, Narrative, and Hybrid Nonfiction
DECEMBER	Unit 4: Nonfiction Research Clubs: Developing Analytical Lenses for Informational Reading
JANUARY	Unit 5: Historical Fiction Book Clubs: Tackling Complex Texts
FEBRUARY/MARCH	Unit 6: Developing Analytical Reading Practices: Interpretation
MARCH/APRIL	Unit 7: Test Preparation
MAY	Unit 8: Social Issues Book Clubs
JUNE	Unit 9: From Author Studies to Independent Projects: Launching a Summer of Reading

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This year we have differentiated the reading calendar for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, so that we give extra support in learning to read closely and with high volume and stamina in sixth grade and move toward more interpretive reading and independence in seventh and eighth grade, and culminating in some “reading for high school” experiences in eighth grade. You’ll notice the influence of the



Common Core State Standards throughout. This year, we move sixth graders right into series books in October. Series reading aims to get kids reading with high volume and at a steady rate. All our research shows that kids who are devoted to a series get more reading done. They move more rapidly through books, and they also move rapidly toward higher-level synthesis work. Just think of Harry Potter readers, who synthesize events across literally thousands of pages of text. We follow this work with two units of study in nonfiction reading, and we incorporate nonfiction in the historical fiction and interpretation units as well. We think that all this reading work will set your sixth graders up to become tremendously strong readers who know authors and genres, who are adept at reading closely, and who are ready to dive into the deep interpretation work that awaits them in more complex novels.

We strongly urge you to give the nonfiction reading units to your science and social studies teachers, so that students get additional instruction and opportunities for repeated practice in nonfiction reading.

This year's curricular calendar has especially been designed with the new Common Core State Standards in mind. These standards call for a thinking curriculum that will prepare learners for the twenty-first century. The standards call for a greater emphasis on higher-level comprehension skills. The standards also led us to spotlight poetry, fairy tales, folk tales and myths, and cross-text work. The other biggest change that informed this curricular calendar is that after almost two decades of research and development work, *Units of Study for Teaching Reading* is available, and we're sure the units will be useful to sixth-grade teachers. This document incorporates a great deal of the thinking and writing that went into those units. We're also eager, as always, to help share resources among teachers. If you devise a new unit of study that you are willing to share with other teachers, please send it to us at [contact@readingandwritingproject.com](mailto:contact@readingandwritingproject.com).

The calendar starts with an overview of essential structures and assessment tools. Following that is a description of each unit of study. The narrative for each unit should give you enough information for you to plan ahead. It will recommend some touchstone texts, for instance, and it will help you foresee and have a deep understanding of the probable arcs of your teaching. At the end of the unit, you'll also find a toolkit of teaching points for the unit, followed by some sample lessons written out in full. The teaching points fit within an overarching path, within which are some "bends in the road," which are basically the smaller parts of the unit. For almost all units, we offer two or three possible paths teachers and students might follow, so that you may differentiate your teaching for the kinds of readers in your care. Our website, [www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com), has many book lists to support the units.

We are aware that there are scores of ways in which a yearlong reading and writing curriculum could unfold for any one grade level and that this is just one possible plan. The Reading and Writing Project cannot support every conceivable journey of study, and so we put forth one recommended path, which we will support with curricular materials and a calendar of conference days. Although we hope and expect that the teachers in schools linked to the Project will study our recommended curricular calendar with great care, we do not expect that you necessarily follow all of the recommendations in this document. We encourage you to gather your own sources of

information, tap into your own passions and interests, and devise a plan that incorporates and also adapts the collective wisdom in this document. We also highly recommend the following texts that will help middle school teachers understand the teaching of reading and adolescent literacy: Lucy Calkins and colleagues' *Units of Study for Teaching Reading: A Curriculum for the Reading Workshop, Grades 3–5*; Donna Santman's *Shades of Meaning: Comprehension and Interpretation in Middle School*; Kyleene Beers' *When Kids Can't Read What Teachers Can Do*; *Adolescent Literacy*, edited by Kyleene Beers, Robert Probst, and Linda Rief; and Richard Allington's *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers*.

Our emphasis is on fostering a reading environment within which students set independent reading goals and strive to meet them. In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell's study of conditions that allow for extraordinary success, Gladwell states that the single most important condition is that the person be allowed an opportunity to work hard. Without that opportunity, all else is for naught. This curriculum above all creates an opportunity for students to work hard on their reading. It is a demanding reading curriculum. It emphasizes personal responsibility and self-initiation on the part of students, and it demands reading expertise and a passion for literature on the part of the teacher. We think these qualities are crucial aspects of students' becoming the kinds of young adults who have agency in their educational futures.

## Bands of Text Complexity

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A word about the readers in your class, the books in your library, and bands of difficulty. Within the units of study, you'll see references to bands of levels—for sixth grade, in particular, R/S/T, which some of your more struggling readers may be reading in; U/V/W, which many sixth graders will be reading; and X/Y/Z, which some of your stronger readers will be reading. We have found that it is useful for teachers and readers to study the complexity of texts within these bands, usually by studying some prototypical texts within a band (*The Tiger Rising* for R/S/T, *The Lightning Thief* for U/V/W, and *The Hunger Games* for X/Y/Z). This kind of study particularly helps teachers differentiate their instruction in conferences, small-group work, and unit planning, so that they teach toward the complexities of the books the kids are actually holding.

At levels R/S/T, for instance, students will find that holding on to the central plotline becomes increasingly difficult because seemingly minor characters may end up being important to the plot. This means that readers need to hold minor characters and subordinate plots in mind. Readers' 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 storyline could return to play a more important role. 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.

Some of your readers will be reading at the U/V/W levels of text difficulty, which means that the storylines are becoming increasingly complicated. Characters will face more than one problem, some problems aren't resolved by the end of the story, relationships change, and some characters may even be unreliable. There are often twists and turns in time, and the character is affected by things that happened long ago. Sometimes the reader even infers ahead of the character, gathering up clues that the main character hasn't yet put together. Things that happen are often separated by many pages as well, so that discerning cause-and-effect and character motivation challenges the reader more. Take a look at what levels or what kinds of books your kids are mostly reading, and tailor your unit so that you do, in fact, teach them to read, with depth and complexity, the books they are holding.

Some of your readers will also be reading X/Y/Z books, such as *The Book Thief* and *The Hunger Games*. In these books, the characters are increasingly complex. They may bump into social issues and discourse that are outside their control. Their lives are shaped by their environments, their family circumstances, their internal flaws—and all of these will have consequences on their emerging, shifting characters. The books at this level also expect that the reader has accumulated some cultural and historical knowledge, since many of the books have historical and allegorical references. There's also a way in which the narratives operate at a symbolic level—they are often implicit social commentary.

## Assessment

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We all know the joy of finding a book that is “just-right” for us. When we are well matched with 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” for us, reading can feel interminable, humiliating, and tedious. There will never be a single litmus-paper test that can accurately match a student with books, but as teachers we can make some progress toward this goal if we provide each student with four things: (1) the opportunity to choose books that he or she wants to read; (2) a community of other readers who promote and 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 highly successful reading; and (4) encouragement to occasionally read a text that is just a little challenging, and the scaffolding to make the experience fruitful.

Assessing reading is enormously complex. Reading is every bit as rich, multilayered, 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



students' reading in ways that give us as full a view as possible. Many middle school teachers assess readers using the books they are holding in their hands. Simply assess their accuracy, their fluency, and their comprehension, right in the text, and you'll have a window into how well they are matched to books. Also, by middle school we want to teach kids to monitor their own comprehension. That said, some of your kids, notably any who did not pass the state test, read below grade level, and you need to know what level they do read, so that you know if you have books for them.

On our website, you'll find an assessment to gauge your readers' levels when necessary. This tool contains two passages at each text level (A–Z and early adult texts), ranging in length from 20–400 plus words, followed by literal and inferential comprehension questions for each passage. Students read the text at one level aloud to teachers, who record reading behaviors and miscues. Teachers record miscues for 100 words; if the student reads with 95%–100% accuracy, the student reads the remainder of the passage silently and then answers questions (ideally answering at least three of the four questions correctly). Through this assessment, a teacher can ascertain the general level of text difficulty that a student is able to read with ease and comprehension.

If your school chooses to use the TCRWP reading level assessment, you'll conduct an independent reading inventory of a student's work with leveled texts in order to learn the text level that the student can read with 96% accuracy and strong comprehension. The truth is that using a short passage and a handful of questions to ascertain whether a child can read, say, a T or a V level text is not perfect. We've also been using some book-length assessment tools, and these are described in the Assessment Interludes sections of the units of study. But the system of tracking readers' progress along a gradient of text difficulty does provide an infrastructure for your reading workshop and allows you to have some handle on kids' progress, especially the kids who read below grade level. Most middle school teachers can't really assess all our kids formally in the limited time most of us have with them, so you'll want to focus on those who will most benefit from a formal assessment.

If you'd like to see the chart of benchmark levels for each grade, visit our website at [www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com).

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

<b>General Range of Adequate Reading Rates by Grade Level</b>			
<b>Grade</b>	<b>WPM</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>WPM</b>
5	170–195	8	235–270
6	195–220	9	250–270
7	215–245	12	250–300

*Harris and Sipay (1990)*

## Organizing the Library

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Many middle school reading workshops in which students are choosing books rapidly, getting a lot of reading done, and following up on series, genres, and authors they come to love, look like this: the books are arranged in baskets by series, authors, and genres and then either leveled within those baskets or marked by band on the outside of the basket. By eighth grade, you may be able to use baskets that are just devoted to authors, series, and genres. A basket might be devoted, for instance, to the *Demonata* series, the *Spiderwick Chronicles*, the *Chronicles of Narnia*, the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, as well as to Judy Blume, Jacqueline Woodson, Walter Dean Myers, Sharon Draper, Maya Angelou, and so forth. Most series are within a range of a few levels. Organizing the library this way makes it easy for readers to do more powerful reading work. You want your students to read all of Judy Blume's novels if they love her. You want them to read the entire Narnia series once they get started. Here's the thing—you also want them to be able to read them in order, if possible. It is incredibly interesting to read all of Judy Blume's novels, for instance, in the order in which they were written—it's almost like reading social history. Much more important, though, is that the series be available in order. If students read series books randomly, they can't do the higher-level inferring we want them to. They can't track character changes or infer cause and effect or character motivation. They're almost relegated to reading for plot. So take a look at your libraries and do the best you can to have students reorder them into interesting and engaging baskets of series, genres, and authors, while maintaining levels or bands of levels that help kids move along as readers. By seventh and eighth grade they may no longer need to pay much attention to levels, but in sixth grade, many young readers often find levels helpful when choosing books rapidly.

## Maintaining Reading Statistics

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We recommend that schools establish and implement policies so that each student in the school maintains a daily record of the books he or she reads in school and at home. There are a variety of ways this log can be kept, including using digital forms. The log might contain the date, the title, the numbers of minutes the student spent reading, and the number of pages, for instance. These logs are not places for responses to reading, nor do students write book summaries in them. They are simply statistics such as a baseball player or a marathon runner might keep. When people work at getting better at something, they almost always keep statistics. Some middle school teachers are also having great success asking students to keep track of their reading online, at [www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com): teachers create a closed classroom site, and kids record the books they have read and want to read and can write reading responses on their own books and to each other if they desire—it's a social networking site for readers. As you might imagine, it's more work for a teacher to launch and supervise this site, but then adolescent readers show that they *want* to record and respond to their reading, which is

great. Some readers are also using the calendar feature on their phones to track their reading.

The most important thing is that you give students opportunities to *reflect* on their statistics, asking themselves: “How is reading going for me? What conditions seem to help me get the most reading done? What fix-it strategies might I use to improve my reading?” Students can work analytically with their partners to notice and think about changes in the average number of pages they read. Students can also notice the genre choices made over time and the relationship between genres or levels and volume. They can also discuss patterns revealed by the time they spend reading at home versus at school. The logs are an irreplaceable window into students’ reading lives. It’s also helpful to gather logs across a grade after a month, or across grades, and compare how much students are reading and how they are moving through books.

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

- A general rule of thumb is that a student should usually be able to read approximately three quarters of a page to a page a minute. (This rule of thumb works for 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 student seems to be reading a book at dramatically slower paces than three quarters of a page a minute. For example, alarms should go off if a student reads eight pages in thirty minutes. Why is the student not reading closer to twenty-four pages in that length of time? There may, of course, be good reasons, but this should raise a flag that something in the student’s reading is not “just right.”
- If a student reads an amount—say, thirty-four pages during half an hour—in school, then brings that same book home and claims to read a much smaller amount—say, eight pages during half an hour—alarms should go off. Is the student making enough time for reading at home? Does the student need support finding places and times to continue his or her reading?

Above all, student logs are a way to be sure that everyone—teachers, principals, and students—is aware of the volume of reading that students are doing. Dick Allington’s research suggests that it takes a student reading two hundred words per minute eight hours to read *Hatchet*. Assuming that your students read for thirty minutes in class and another thirty to sixty minutes at home and they read at a rate of two hundred words per minute, you should expect a student to finish reading *Hatchet* in five to eight days, which seems entirely reasonable. You may find that a particular student takes twice as long to read *Hatchet*. This should prompt some research. Why is this student reading especially slowly? If the student is reading below 120 accurate words per minute, alarm bells should go off. This student should be reading easier texts! Or perhaps the student is sitting in front of a text rather than reading it.

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

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At the start of the year, teachers need to confer with readers. We are not saying that you have to start with a formal assessment. You do, though, have to ensure that every student is holding a book he or she can actually read. If you know students' reading levels from a prior year, then assume they can read at least at those levels and have them choose within those levels. Letting them choose authors, series, and titles they're confident they can finish within a week helps keep them within reasonable levels as well. If you don't know their levels, have them choose books they can read at a quick pace to start and watch their reading habits for a few days. See if they are making progress through their books. Watch their body language: are they engaged? If they seem distracted, ask them to read aloud a small part to you and/or talk a little about the book. You'll quickly get a sense of which kids are reading a book that is too hard or way too easy.

Your first priority will be to assess any reader who seems not to be reading. Watch for signs of disengagement: the head that revolves, the student who is always losing his or her place, the adolescent who uses reading time as a chance to get a drink of water or go to the bathroom. Then move to the readers who seem to be reading slowly and see what's going on with them. Pretty soon, you'll have an idea of what your readers are doing. Ask them to jot some Post-its with their thoughts as well, and you'll see what kind of thinking work they're doing for a few days—another window into their understanding of their novels.

At some point, probably in late October, you'll want to take some time to deeply assess the readers who are not clearly at or above grade level.

## The Components of Balanced Literacy

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The term *balanced literacy* comes, in part, from the recognition that readers need a variety of opportunities to learn. The reading workshop provides students time to read with a mentor who is a passionately engaged reader and wears the love of reading on her or his sleeve, one who offers opportunities to talk and sometimes write about reading, a mentor who offers explicit instruction in the skills and strategies of proficient reading. All of this is incredibly important, but alone it is not sufficient. Students also need the opportunities to learn that can be provided by the 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 TCRWP teachers will refer to the writing curricular calendar for help with writing. Then, too, students also need opportunities to hear wonderful literature read aloud and frequent opportunities to participate in book talks about the read-aloud text. We hope teachers read aloud and lead interactive read-aloud sessions several times a week. Students need opportunities to read texts within content areas and to receive instruction in reading those texts well. And students who struggle with fluency (that is, students 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 students listen with rapt attention, clamoring for more. The payoff for reading aloud becomes even greater when teachers read aloud from a wide range of genres, which generally happens when teachers comb reading aloud into all parts of the days, regarding reading aloud as a terrific resource during science, social studies, math, and so on. This can be done by creating a schoolwide read-aloud schedule.

If you are fortunate enough to have a schedule that allows for a one-hour reading workshop, then it is possible to work in a read-aloud, a minilesson, and independent reading each day. If you have only forty or forty-five minutes for reading workshop, you probably can't work all pieces in each day; you might consider creating a schedule like this:

<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>
Read-aloud and talk (about 20 minutes)	Minilesson (about 10 minutes)	Read-aloud and talk (about 20 minutes)	Minilesson (about 10 minutes)	Independent reading and small-group work (about 45 minutes)
Independent reading (about 25 minutes)	Independent reading (about 30 minutes)	Independent reading (about 25 minutes)	Independent reading (about 30 minutes)	
	Share and/or partner talk (about 5 minutes)		Share and/or partner talk (about 5 minutes)	

If you are working within forty- or forty-five-minute periods, we encourage you to rally your colleagues in joining you in a study of the benefits of reading aloud. Current research supports the tremendous benefits of daily read-alouds and their relationship to promoting growth in independent reading. Perhaps you might get the science and social studies teachers to read aloud for twenty minutes just one time a week from a piece that connects to their current unit of study. It might be that ELA teachers read aloud to students on Mondays and Wednesdays, science teachers read aloud once a week on Tuesdays, and social studies teachers read aloud once a week on Thursdays. With just a bit of planning, you could ensure that your students are engaging with both narrative and non-narrative texts each week across many topics and subjects. The content-area teachers may be amazed at how the read-aloud supports their units of study and increases student interest and knowledge.



The best way to tap into the potential power of reading aloud, however, is to use the read-alouds and book talks as ways 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 students draw on their full repertoire of reading strategies or to angle the read-aloud to support the development of a particular comprehension skill. Based on this decision, the teacher decides to demonstrate and then scaffold students in using either one or many skills and strategies.

If you choose carefully, the read-aloud text can support the independent reading 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. This means that the read-aloud book will offer opportunities for deep talk about characters. If, on the other hand, the class is working on nonfiction, and some of the students' independent reading involves nonfiction texts, you will want to read aloud nonfiction texts that allow you to show students how nonfiction readers talk and think about and across texts.

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

### *Supporting Students' 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 students be more attentive to vocabulary.

Research is clear: the single most important thing you can do to enhance your students' knowledge of words is to lure your students into lots and lots and lots of reading. If students 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.

We have found this last year that word study based on Donald Bear et al.'s *Words Their Way* has helped a lot of middle school students who struggle with reading learn the spelling and word patterns they, for whatever reason, may have missed when they were younger. You may want to assess your middle school students for high-frequency words and spelling stage to see if some of them would benefit from this kind of word study. Those assessments are available on our website.



## UNIT ONE

# Agency and Independence

## *Launching Reading Workshop with Experienced Readers*

### SEPTEMBER

#### Overview

As your sixth graders enter your classroom (and in most cases a new school), your hope is, of course, that they continue to 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 *Constructing Curriculum: Alternate Units of Study*, the final volume of *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*), aims to help readers familiar with reading workshop and the reading process engage intellectually with their books and with their reading lives right from the first day of school. 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, then you'll want to turn to *Building a Reading Life*, the first volume of *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*, which introduces readers to the work on which they will build their whole lives. That unit also gives you, as a teacher, the latest research on reading assessments and reading levels and on critical structures within your classroom.

Let's assume that you have a class full of readers most of whom are knowledgeable about the essential skills of reading and how reading workshop goes. 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 on when the book gets hard in easy-to-solve ways. These readers don't necessarily have to be reading at higher reading levels. As Ehrenworth describes in the "Intellectual Independence" unit of study, some readers who are holding lower-level texts because English is a new language or because they came to reading later in their childhood may, if they have had good reading instruction, already be doing a lot of intellectual work in those texts, and these readers, like readers who are reading complex books, may be ready to become increasingly independent, synthesizing a whole array of strategies as they work toward increasingly big purposes. In this unit, therefore, you'll teach your readers to draw upon what they know, thereby teaching them to self-initiate in ways that allow them to draw on their repertoire of strategies.

## Carrying Essential Structures and Understandings Forward

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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.

### *Reading Records*

Your readers may be avid readers and 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 they are reading! But to move forward with increased agency, they need you to make sure *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. Later in the unit, you'll find a lesson that compares baseball players and fans and their obsession with statistics to 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 the later lesson, we'll use paper and pens to show how keeping a simple reading log on paper can help you reflect on 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. Tracking reading volume is also increasingly important because the Common Core State Standards remind us that students must be able to read independently for an extended period of time.

We're pretty adamant about working within one kind of reading log in earlier grades. 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. 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 into better choices. One method students have found productive for keeping track of their reading is a paper log that has columns listing 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 then putting on each date the title of the book and the number of pages read helps them 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 during 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 how many total pages a reader accomplished each day rewards volume. If the reader and teacher are interested in studying rate, then 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 ([www.goodreads.com](http://www.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.

### *Partnerships*

Partnerships are *crucial* to success in reading. 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 readers need protected time for reading and protected time to talk with someone about what they have been reading, as well as what *work* they have been doing as a reader. 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, from recall to synthesis to analysis. As a reminder, the Common Core State Standards stress that it is important for students to engage in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners—more specifically, literary partnerships—in which they clearly express their ideas about a text and build on others' ideas as well.

There are lots of ways to structure partnerships for different needs, 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 swap books. So some of your partnerships are not exactly matched by level, and the partners 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 letting friends be reading partners, fearing that friends may get distracted from work. Think about how much you like to work with your friends, though. And think about the notion of self-discipline as well. 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 whom 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 friends. Finally, some of your partnerships will reflect your urge to show kids that you can make friends through reading, that books bring us together. Maybe you need one child to partner with another as a mentor. Maybe you want to help develop one student's habits by exposing that student to a successful reader. That is a valid choice too. Transparency in these choices will help your students 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 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: "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 one another or to meet at lunch. Or you may decide to reward them for doing extra reading outside school by providing some conversation time together in your classroom. Your goal here is not to launch and sustain book clubs. Your goal is to acknowledge that kids should be carrying all their reading skills forward from year to year, which means that most of them already participate in informal clubs all the time—they recommend books to one another, they swap books, and so on.



## *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, keep track of their thinking, and develop new thinking. They'll have been jotting things down on 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 visible ways, so they can share it with other readers. They'll probably want a reading notebook as a place to hold their Post-its, write more about reading, and 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 (hence those statistics again) and how their writing about reading supports their thinking work next to their reading volume.

## *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 or readers who love Judy Blume and all her books or readers who love action and adventure in any genre or strong relationships and character development in any genre or readers who like books that deal with social issues. That is, moving up reading levels is an underpinning of their work, but it is not the overall goal of their work. 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/M/O. The Percy Jackson books are U/V/W. 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 you organize the library to reflect their interest and expertise.

If they are in this unit of study, then your kids should be coming from their prior year of reading either with actual books in hand that they want to read (a bag of books they put together the prior spring) or knowing 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 teaches 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 an X—so readers need to pay attention as they read and keep track of how

their book choices are helping them get a lot of reading done. You shouldn't always 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 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 not to understand the setting or 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 one another. If you're concerned about a reader, ask that reader not only to tell you about what he or she is reading but also to read a section 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. Especially, pay attention to any readers who read below grade level—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 levels 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

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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, therefore, 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 in order to reach a higher orbit—it is propelled by thrusters, just as readers can propel themselves forward. She asks students to think about *anytime* 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 they have used in the past, such as practicing or having a mentor, and 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 how the single condition that leads young people to become extraordinary adults is that 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 lifelong habits you can help them 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.

In your next lesson, you may want to compare reading with being at a baseball game. When an expert on baseball watches a game, such as a student who studies his team, knows his statistics, and understands the nuances of what is happening even when there are no homeruns, the game is full of intrigue and fascination. Compare reading to that experience—just as a baseball game is more interesting to an expert than it is to a novice, so 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, M'am*, in which every detail matters. As you read, ask your students to use everything they know about reading, all their strategies. Remind them what they know about how stories go, so that 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 with them 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 they are passionate about. If they don't recall this work, remind them how much the covers and blurbs tell us 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 simply to 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 filled-out log that includes 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 promote or some adult mystery novels that will intrigue readers with 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. You want your volume and rate to be high. Then explain to your students how, whenever someone is becoming better at something, they keep statistics. Mention baseball players, who are obsessed with stats, as an example. Give a personal story about keeping track of your distance and time while training for a race or keeping track of what and how much you eat when you are on a diet. Then invite your readers to study your stats so far as a reader. Partnerships can come up with observations about what the week of heavy reading tells them about how reading is going for you. 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 read a lot. You may want to have 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. Then show the kids a second week of your log. On this one, have some difficult book, perhaps a

genre you struggle with, and have the time you spend 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's success varies, and statistics help us keep track of how reading is going for us and what kinds of books seem to help us read more. Then let your readers loose on their own logs, and set up 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, especially if you've shown how it is helping you.

Finally, you'll probably want to teach your students some methods for retelling their books to their partners at a more inferential level. They may be used to simply recalling events. Using a movie or a read-aloud text as an example, show your students how to *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 behavior, 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

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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* or *Bridge to Terabithia* or *The Notebook of Melanin Sun* or 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. Use your read-aloud text to do this work—perhaps *Edward's Eyes*. In *Edward's Eyes* the narrator 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 affects 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, M'am*, on the other hand, you are looking at the characters from the outside, since the narration is third person, so it is a different kind of getting to know them.

As you teach your readers to read between the lines, you'll also have to show them how to withhold judgment, to understand that their understanding is partial. In complex novels and stories, characters change over time, or sometimes they reveal

themselves slowly, so that 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 skim over them, 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 for a reason, to ask the reader to linger. Invite your readers to find these scenes and 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 sometimes a chapter jumps ahead to a different moment or place in time, and 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 readers pay attention in complex texts is by making connections across parts of the story that are not right alongside each other. That is, sometimes a reference actually refers 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 model for your students, showing 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 to something that was depicted much earlier in the novel. This kind of synthesis is crucial to reading complex texts.

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

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Your readers will be used to talking with 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 talk about 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, “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 connected,” all those small notes that documented 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 middle school, few of our readers own the books—they are community property. So usually readers use small Post-its and reading notebooks to record and develop their thinking. You'll probably want to show your readers how sometimes readers write “short,” making quick jottings as they read so that they remember their thinking, especially before the book changes and their thinking changes, and 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, as well, how passionate readers talk about their books with depth and zeal. Demonstrate how our job is to make our partner fall in love with the book too or be intrigued by it. Any zealous reader wants another reader to read the same book or to want to read it. We accomplish that 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 have that conversation later once he or she has finished it. Those literary conversation moves are worth modeling and practicing and celebrating.

As your readers begin to value their literary conversations and prepare for 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 a novel to Charlotte in *Charlotte's Web*, and everyone would know that character was loyal and 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 the Harry Potter books, which have entered our cultural heritage as global texts. Another kind of allusion is worth describing as well—the one the Common Core State Standards describe as the literary tradition of a text, its context. For instance, you might refer to *The Hunger Games* not only as a compelling novel but as a dystopian one, and compare it to *1984* or *Fahrenheit 451*—your kids don't have to have 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. Kyleene Biers 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 will be 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 through their Post-its and notebook entries to see what kind of thinking they have been developing. Show them how to reflect on which 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 that may involve other readers in shared work. They may seek out other fantasy readers for informal book club meetings, or they may decide to continue with an author and form an informal author-study group. They may decide

to work on getting more reading done by adding more varieties 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.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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There are a few ways that you'll know that your students are ready for this unit of study. One way is to find out what your students already know about themselves as readers and what habits they bring with them by asking them on the first day to take a few minutes and create with a partner a list of some of the tools they often use to keep track of their reading. If most of your kids jot down tools such as reading logs, Post-its, bookmarks, and perhaps reading notebooks, that's a good sign that they're used to keeping track of how their reading is going, and they have been used to doing some thinking as they read.

Another method you may use is to invite students to talk to a partner about how they choose books. Listen for whether they mention authors and genres they already love. Pay attention to which students seem familiar with their own reading levels from elementary school reading workshop. See if they talk about using the blurb on the back of the book or looking inside to consider how difficult the book is and how long it might take them to read it. Then watch your kids as they choose books right away and get to reading. A red flag that kids need extra support would be kids who seem to stay forever at the shelves or book baskets as if they have no idea what they might enjoy reading. Others include restlessness, getting up to go to the bathroom, body language that shows that this kind of concentration is new. Still another is readers who choose books below grade level or who struggle to read grade level texts, which for incoming sixth graders are about levels U/V/W (*The Lightning Thief*, *Stargirl*).

If you see these signs of trouble, you may want to turn to the *Building a Reading Life* volume from *Units of Study for Teaching Reading* for ideas about how to get reading going for these students. If most of your kids know how to choose books, though, and they easily handle the basic reading tools of logs and Post-its, they're in good shape for this unit and ready to accelerate their intellectual independence as readers.

The goal of this unit of study is to increase students' agency—to instill a sense that they are in control of their reading life and that their reading life is an ongoing project. As you help kids become more independent, you'll give them more choices—choice and independence are inextricably linked. So your kids will make choices about what kinds of reading logs prove useful in keeping statistics. They'll make choices about using Post-its or going right to a reading notebook. They'll choose whether to read paperbacks or Kindles, Nooks, or iPads. Expect your students to make some mistakes. They may think they're ready to abandon Post-its and then find they are not really using their notebook often enough to develop insightful ideas about their books. They may forget to prepare to talk with a partner and find they have little to say. They may think they are “over” reading logs only to find that they can't remember the history or trajectory of what they've been reading and they have no tools to reflect on their read-

ing life. Keep an eye on your readers! Watch them, talk to them, move quickly in conferences, keeping an eye in this first unit of study on their volume of reading, on the liveliness of their partner talk, and on their ability to recall and synthesize the stories they are reading. If you are worried about a reader, either assess that reader using the book he or she is reading or perform a more formal assessment to make sure that you and the student know something about what level of books seem right for this reader (and that you have those level of books in your library). And keep an eye out for opportunities to praise your readers for intellectual endeavors and self-discipline.

## **Part One: Helping Readers Develop Agency to Lift Their Reading Lives into a New Orbit**

- Session I: “Taking Charge of Our Reading Lives and Becoming Active Learners.” “The most important thing I can teach you today, then, 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 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 in order to achieve.”
  
- Session II: “Reading with Agency.” “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.”
  
- Session III: “Choosing Books Wisely.” “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.”
  
- Session IV: “Using the Reading Log as an Artifact to Help Us Reflect On and Improve Our Reading.” “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.”
  
- Session V: “Making Purposeful Choices about Our Methods for Retelling.” “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

- Session VI: "Reading between the Lines." "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 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."
- Session VII: "Imagining the Scenes in Our Stories." "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."
- Session VIII: "Imagining the Moments in between the Scenes." "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."
- Session IX: "Understanding References and Connecting the Parts of Our Stories." "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 ever refer to something in another book in the series."
- Session X: "Working Harder When the Book Gets Hard." "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**

- Session XI: “Writing Short and Writing Long in Response to Books.” “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.”
- Session XII: “Talking about Books with Passion and Insight.” “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.”
- Session XIII: “Talking about More Than One Book at a Time—The Art of the Allusion.” “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.”
- Session XIV: “Reading Aloud with Power and Grace.” “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.”
- Session XV: “Using Artifacts to Reflect on Our Reading, and Making Plans to Outgrow Ourselves as Readers.” “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

# Investigating Characters across Series

## OCTOBER

### Introduction

Middle school can be an incredible time in the lives of our readers—incredible in every sense of the word! To many of our twelve- and thirteen-year-olds, middle school is too fast, too confusing, too political, too awkward, and at times too hormonal to be believed.

When faced with the challenges of this time, many readers live in a state of utter disbelief: “I can’t believe he’s going out with her.” “I can’t believe my teacher gave that assignment.” “I can’t believe anything my parents say.” “I can’t believe that I can be a good reader.” Tragically, for many students, that last disbelief is the most enduring. This unit seeks to reverse that trend. October is the perfect time to ignite the student passions that will fuel that work, and series books are the ideal tool.

Series books can be intoxicating for even the most reluctant of readers. Pairing a student with the right series at this critical time can be the difference between inspiring a lifelong reader and allowing a student to become someone for whom reading takes a lifetime. Some of the world’s hottest young adult fiction of recent years has been within series: Harry Potter, Twilight, The Hunger Games, Percy Jackson and the Olympians, the list goes on and will continue to go on.

Our mission here has four parts:

- Students should feel passionate about reading.
- Students need to learn what kinds of readers they are and what books they like.
- Adolescents need to feel and exhibit a sense of independence and agency around finding books, they need to understand that this experience is social.
- All students need to read a lot.

Series books work in this regard for one simple reason. Life is serialized. Students have a lifetime of schema for understanding how people and events from one encounter or experience connect to subsequent experiences. Kids know what it is to feel passionately about a sports team that they follow from week to week or season to season. They understand how Justin Bieber’s YouTube videos make a path all the way to his big screen 3D movie. They feel the anticipatory excitement for the next Call of Duty video game before they’re even done with the current one. Even *The Simpsons* demands an understanding that is grown across many shows, and middle school students do this work well, organically. In this unit, we will start with all that students know about synthesizing information across multiple “texts” and we’ll stretch them to be excited about the inclusion of series books in their lexicon of great experiences.

Moving into October, your students will already have the tools to study themselves as readers. For them, September was all about knowing themselves, setting goals, and keeping records. As we start this series work, the biggest challenge is going to be finding the books to get us started. As you read this, don’t worry about not having the “perfect” library or having access to all the books that you will need right away. Instead, you will want to start your planning for this unit by thinking about how you will introduce your readers to all the ways they can find books that they will need to complete the various series that they start.

It must also be said here that we cannot expect our readers to fall in love with series books if we are not authentically involved with series books ourselves. There are hundreds of series out there for you to love out loud. When we were younger, series like *Goosebumps*, *Sweet Valley High*, and *Nancy Drew* took their readers on adventures that could span thirty or fifty books per series. While you will certainly reach back into your reading past, you will want to share your experiences of series books you are reading now. Series books are designed to hook kids into characters. Your readers are probably already fans of *Shredderman*, *Percy Jackson*, *Twilight’s Bella Swan*, girls in the *Clique* novels, and students in the world of the *Kimani Tru* series. You can do your students a world of incredible good by becoming a fan of such a series yourself. In addition to modeling your own life as someone who reads series books, it is helpful here to know a little bit about what your students love, so you can help them find more of what they love.

## Preparing Your Library

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The challenge of accessing books will compound if you make the decision to use this unit to launch same-book partnerships or informal book clubs. This means you’ll need not just a run of books from a series, but multiple copies of them! By all means, refer to Booksources if you will be purchasing new books; their discounts are terrific, and they have a collection of books that we have grouped and leveled. Be sure to browse the shelves of the teen section of the library or of a bookstore to reintroduce yourself to the latest series books. Photograph covers and ask kids about titles and preferences. Do not ignore graphic novels or books based on video games or superheroes. Some of the

most complex and innovative character and series work in young adult literature is happening with speech bubbles attached.

While your students rely on the classroom library that you establish, it's also important that you teach your students to be independent and find their own books. You will want to teach students how to use the resources available to them—school and public libraries, friends, bookstores, and ebooks—and encourage them to do so. You may decide to create a bulletin board space where students can post the titles of books they want to read within their series—some students may have books at home they are willing to lend.

Unlike books in some of the earlier series, series books at higher levels must be read in sequence if students are to do the higher-level thinking work. As one reads the books in a series, most of the characters do change and the problems set up in the first book are often carried over and evolve in subsequent books. For example, the relationship between Percy and Annabel changes dramatically throughout the Percy Jackson series. It is important that students are set up to synthesize text by reading the series in order, tracking the problems the characters face.

In some cases, the levels of the books change across a series. For example, the Percy Jackson series spans U/V/W. Therefore, you will want to have at least the first two books in the series ready for students to read. Of course, this may mean that you only have the right books for the first week of the unit—after that you may have a giant gap—so you will want to think ahead. Will you share with colleagues in your school? Will you and your students make use of your school and local libraries? Will you share Kindle accounts?

When we consider the expectations of the Common Core State Standards, it becomes increasingly important to use series books as a vehicle to deliver rigorous reading instruction. Because many popular series have also been made into films, there is a prime opportunity to have students compare the two media and analyze the respective choices the authors and filmmakers made. The Common Core State Standards also stress the need to analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to one another and the whole. All of this work can be done when middle school students read across books in a series.

You ultimately will decide which texts are right for your students and your community, but here is a list of popular series for middle schoolers recommended by teachers across the country. You can also go to our website ([www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com)) for continually updated lists of popular books in many categories.

## **Dragon Series**

The Fire Within

Dragons of Deltora

Dragon's Blood

Eragon

## **Vampire and Demon Series**

Bunnacula  
Dripping Fang  
My Sister the Vampire  
High School Bites  
Vampire Kisses  
Cirque du Freaque  
Demonata  
The Mortal Instruments  
Interview with a Vampire  
Twilight

## **Action Adventure Series**

Franny K. Stein  
Otto Undercover  
Time Warp Trio  
Fact Meets Fiction  
Edgar & Ellen  
Stormbreaker  
The Mediator  
Young Bond  
The 39 Clues  
Fear Street  
Guardians of Gahoole  
The Ranger's Apprentice  
Shadow Children  
The Sisters Grimm

## **Graphic Novel Series**

Naruto  
Bleach

Dragon Ball Z

Bone

### **Sports Series**

Baseball Card Adventures

Comeback Kids

### **Others**

Beacon Street Girls

Kimani Tru

Clique

Del Rio Bay Clique

## **The Role of Read-Aloud**

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Of course, you will use the books you read aloud as examples to support the work your students are doing in their own series. This means you will choose to read aloud a series to your students, and this involves a number of considerations. First, you will need to choose a series that is similar to or a little bit harder than the series your students are reading. A second major concern is length. You will want to read a few stories across a series in order to show what it means to read in a series, so the books or stories you choose will need to be brief. This is challenging in sixth grade, as grade level novels are far too long for read-alouds. You may decide to use more complex picture books, like some of Patricia Pollock's books that have recurring characters and are similar to a series. Episodic narratives like Nikki Grimes' *Bronx Masquerade* also work well, or you may decide to use a series of short stories such as *First French Kiss*, by Adam Bagdasarian, or Kathi Appelt's *Kissing Tennessee*, both of which follow a character over time in a series of short stories.

## **Beginning Your Partnerships or Informal Book Clubs**

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You will probably want to begin some book partnerships this month, and you may even decide to launch some informal book clubs in your class. Partnerships and book clubs are an opportunity to push our readers to read *more*, because they rely on members' having read to the same point in their texts. This means that partners or clubs

need to make and keep deadlines, saying, “By Wednesday, let’s read up to Chapter Six,” or, “Let’s talk up to Chapter Six.” You will want to check whether your readers’ self-imposed deadlines are aligned with Dick Allington’s research (cited in the prelude of this calendar). Be sure readers carry books between home and school, devoting time most evenings to reading. It’s not uncommon for book clubs to jettison reading, so this is a time when keeping reading statistics will be especially important.

You can use the structure of partners and clubs to support differentiation of instruction, helping readers in one club work toward improving their volume of reading, for example, perhaps asking them to be more attentive to logging their time and pages read as a way of setting new goals for volume. Meanwhile, you can help another partnership get on with the goal of doing intertextual work such as comparing a character across the series. Just as you conferred with individual readers, you’ll now confer with individual partnerships and clubs, helping them articulate and set goals for their reading this month and coaching them to use strategies that will help them meet these goals.

As your partners begin working, it will be important that you set aside a little time each day for them to talk about their reading. To scaffold student conversations early on, you may want to teach partners to ask each other such questions as:

- “What kind of person is the character? How do you know?”
- “What caused the character to do that [feel that way]?”
- “Do you think he [she] did the right thing? What in the book makes you think that?”
- “What do you think will happen next, based on everything you know so far?”

Notice that these questions can’t be answered with one word and that they support students in developing ideas about their characters rather than just retelling what happened in their books.

To help sustain partner talk and push students to build more ideas and perform complex analysis, you may encourage students to prepare for conversations with partners by rereading whatever jottings they have made thus far. These jottings may be in a reader’s notebook or on Post-its. 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?” or, “I thought that too because \_\_\_\_\_,” or, “Another example of that is \_\_\_\_\_.” (For additional prompts, see *Following Characters into Meaning*, Volume 2 of *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*.)

Whole-class conversations are also a wonderful way to support students’ partner conversations. You can provide large amounts of scaffolding, and with this help, students can grow a conversation by sticking to an idea or two. This means that when you finish reading a chapter aloud, 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 student 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 one another. The Common Core State Standards suggest that students should be able to determine central ideas of texts and cite evidence to support their analysis. Use this whole-class conversation time to ramp up these skills.

As you prepare for the unit and think about structures you’ll put into place, be sure you keep in mind that readers who were assessed a few weeks ago could well be ready to move up to more challenging books. Some of them will have entered the year rusty from a summer without reading and, after just a few weeks of reading, 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 moving students up reading levels while they are in a genre that is comfortable for them. You needn’t do running records on assessment passages in order to move kids up—instead, ask them to read aloud bits of a leveled book and listen for fluency and accuracy, then talk with them to determine comprehension. If their speed at moving through books has increased, that too can be a sign they’re ready to move up. Series books are especially good for supporting readers as they move to harder levels. You can do some whole- or small-group work on supporting oneself in harder books and talk up the purposeful goal-driven stance that can support acceleration.

## Part One: Getting to Know Characters

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You may decide to launch this unit by talking about other readers who love series—you may be an avid series reader yourself, and if so, you will want to share your own reading experiences. If not, you can highlight other reading mentors for your students. For example, you might recount the story of a friend who doesn’t like to read a series until all (or at least several) of the books in the series are published because he likes to move from one book right into the next so that he can keep thinking about the characters, the challenges they encounter, and the way they change over time. Similarly, you may want to tell stories about groups of readers who become obsessed with a series like *Twilight* and can’t stop talking and thinking about the series. Certainly, in addition to using actual series books as an example, you may want to highlight the similarities to television, movies, or sports teams that we track over time. Remember that series reading is not new—Dickens’ and Conan Doyle’s works were originally published as series—and readers throughout the centuries have enjoyed texts that evolve and keep our imaginations captivated. Series reading is not just for adolescents; many adult readers seek out, devour, and adore series books.

Assuming that readers are beginning the unit by starting the first book in a series, your instruction at the very start might not vary dramatically from what you’d teach for *any* narrative story. You’d alert readers about noting the setting and identifying the main character and the problem or challenge this character faces. In other words, you’d teach beginning-of-a-book strategies, those a reader relies on to build engagement

and settle down into *any* story, *any* narrative. You might say, “When we pick up a book and read its starting pages, we try to get to know the characters,” or, “We try to see the world of this book in our mind’s eye.” Your instruction may focus on reminding readers to envision the characters and setting, in particular—not just to engage with them in their *current* book, but because the characters and the setting will be featured again and again in future books in this series.

The point, of course, is not only to help readers picture the text, as if it were a film being run through the projector of the reader’s own mind, but also to help readers read with a sense of identification. As you read aloud, then, you’ll sometimes say, “How do you think he’s feeling right now? Turn and talk.” Or, “I’m worried about him. Aren’t you? Turn and tell your partner about your worries.” Or you may say, “Show me on your faces what Rob is feeling *now*,” or, a bit later, “Use your body to show me what’s happening to Rob *now*. Things are changing, aren’t they?”

Ultimately, the goal is for students to envision—by losing themselves in the text—as they move through any story, whether during read-aloud or as they read independently. You’ll want to teach children to envision through every means possible, constantly synthesizing their knowledge of the world with the words on the page. During independent reading and the follow-up partnership work, you’ll probably encourage children to talk about their mental pictures. “What do the places in the book look like? What have you seen before that can help you picture the character, the character’s home, or the locale in which the book is situated?” You might encourage readers to quickly sketch a character or a setting as they read and then, in their partnership conversation, talk through the reasons for this particular image. You can teach them that one way to get these conversations going is by asking questions like these: “What’s going on around the character?” “How is your character standing or moving in this scene? What do you see his face looking like in this moment?” “Who else is there? What’s the scene like?” Let them know that sometimes their pictures will be a bit out of focus. They may run into parts they don’t really understand. Our job as readers is to draw on all we have read, asking ourselves and our partners many questions, then imagining as best we can.

This is a busy and important time for your readers for another reason, too. This may be the first time this year they are in same-book partnerships and some of them may even be in informal clubs—and you’ll want them to get it right the first time. Part Three, “Bringing Together Reading Lives, Texts That Matters, and Partners,” in the *Building a Reading Life* volume of *Units of Study for Teaching Reading* has several sessions on developing strong and thoughtful reading partnerships. For instance, Sessions XII and XIV suggest ways of setting partners up to retell parts of their reading in increasingly stronger ways. When partners start from the beginning, you can teach them not just to retell everything but to pop out the most important pieces. When you teach partners to retell starting with right now in the text and moving backward, you help them look for relationships in the text and synthesize what they have been reading. You will continue to teach the habits the Common Core State Standards describe in their Speaking and Listening standards, habits like coming prepared to a conversation, listening carefully and responding, questioning, and so on.

We imagine that if there are book clubs in your room, they will be fairly informal, most likely doing the work that partners are doing, only in larger groups of three or four peers. If your students seem ready to take on even more advanced club work, then certainly you could turn to suggestions from the January book club unit in this calendar. Also, the *Tackling Complex Texts* volumes of *Units of Study for Teaching Reading* offer a lot of guidance about setting up your book clubs, advice that can be tailored to your classroom. Though these two volumes discuss historical fiction clubs, the conferring and small-group work embedded in the sessions can be quite useful to you here. You will want to pay particular attention to Sessions I–III and VI–XI. If your readers have not yet become accustomed to writing as a way to capture their own ideas, if they’re not holding on to their ideas in this fashion, you’ll want to help readers use writing as a way to think about reading. You may institute a ritual of giving readers a bit of time after they’ve read and before they talk to look over the text and review their notes in order to “get ready for their talk.” You’ll also want to establish and monitor the protocol for club discussions.

Typically, you’ll want each same-book partnership or informal club to choose a series suited to their interests and reading levels and to start with the first book in this series. You’ll monitor the reading deadlines that partners and clubs set. If, for example, a partnership decides to read two chapters in their book by a certain day, you’ll want to check that this is a satisfactory goal (it shouldn’t be too little) and a realistic goal (it shouldn’t be too ambitious) for this level. You’ll coach into the conversations partnerships might have as they get to know the characters. Teach readers to note Post-it points in the initial pages of the book in ways that help them get to know a character. Teach them also to cite the specific spots in the book that support their observations and analysis about a character and the inferences they draw from a particular text. As partnerships and clubs familiarize themselves with the characters and the setting in their book, you might also urge them to make a mental movie of their reading. Partners may decide to discuss (even sketch out) a quick map of the setting where the story takes place (especially if this setting is to be revisited in later books).

As you develop additional teaching points for this part, look at the list below and also consult the *Following Characters into Meaning* volume of *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*.

## Part Two: Moving Deeper into a Series and Analyzing Characters across Series

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When a partnership or informal club progresses to the second book in a series, your instruction, too, can round a bend. You might alert readers to this specifically, saying, “Starting our second book in a series allows us to ask ourselves, ‘What changes across these books and what remains the same?’” Readers will come to understand that together they might make a list of ways in which the same character grows or changes in this second book. Here is the chance to revisit those earlier Post-its from the first book. Partners may look at their initial theories about a character to ask, “Was I right

about Luke?” or, “Is Luke still the same person he was in the last book or are there ways in which he has changed?” Remind students that as they make each statement, citing specific text-based evidence is key. This cannot be overstated, and you will want to spend some time making sure that all your groups have mastered this work. Most books in a series have characters who fit a type and plots that are formulaic. In many ways, therefore, the second book will reinforce the patterns set in the first.

As you develop the ways in which your partners and informal clubs interact, the Common Core State Standards provide a helpful set of expectations for conversation. They describe that students should engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade-six topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own ideas clearly. The following habits they concisely describe are ones we have always expected in our book clubs:

- Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion.
- Follow rules for collegial discussions, set specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.
- Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.
- Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing.

We can also expect our students to read intertextually. There are multiple ways in which readers might compare the two books they have read so far. In the same way adults addicted to a series discuss their favorites, readers can decide which of the two books was more exciting or funny or dramatic and why. They may pay particular attention to any new secondary character who emerges. They may discuss the author’s craft across the two books, noting, for example, whether the author uses the same techniques in each to make the reader laugh, whether it feels like the “same person” wrote the second book and why. Remember that reading the second (or *n*th) book in a series is a reader’s chance at experiencing the second (or *n*th) book by *the same author*. This increases their ability to recognize this author’s specific craft moves, writing style, and general voice. As they come to love a series, readers also often come to love the author too. You may decide to urge the readers in your club to visit this author’s fan page or to send an email to this author with their observations and/or suggestions (or deliver them via Skype).

You will want readers to be aware of and look out for the plotlines that continue from one text to another. In many cases, the struggles of the characters in a series are not entirely resolved in neat and tidy ways. Instead these struggles are transferred or carried from one book to the next. Sixth graders will also benefit from instruction and discussions around themes; you might teach them to identify how a particular theme

runs through multiple books within a series. Teaching students to carry the information from one book in a series into the next (and the next and the next) will set them up to synthesize greater amounts of text and ultimately to read increasingly longer and complex texts.

### Part Three: Reading with Increased Expertise and Power

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By the time they pick up the fifth or sixth book in a series, chances are your readers will have become insiders to the world of their particular series. If there is a base setting that is being repeated, such as the same old dining table or the clubhouse that was featured in previous books, then readers will have the sense of returning to a familiar place. The author will likely introduce the characters and setting afresh in each book. Portions of the book that repeat information that readers already know from previous books will add to their confidence and to their affiliation with these characters. You probably already noticed an excitement in your readers at the beginning of the second story about the same set of characters, but if you didn't, you'll certainly do so now.

In the younger grades, main characters tended to remain the same age across all the books (Bailey School Kids), while series at higher reading levels have characters who mature quite distinctly across successive books—Harry Potter eventually leaves Hogwarts, for example. This is another chance to differentiate instruction across your classroom. Higher-level readers may be encouraged to track and talk about ways in which their character matures as he or she grows older, while you'll channel your lower-level readers (whose books will tend to be more formulaic in order to scaffold comprehension) to note the pattern of how each book in a series tends to go. Teaching students to look critically across a text using what you learn is also important, because it helps students move deeper into each successive text in a series.

Previously, you taught readers to make their talk more accountable by citing or pointing to specific spots in their books as they made an observation about a character or some other plot feature. As clubs mature through the month, they'll have *several* texts—several books in a series—that they will reference during a group discussion. You'll want to nudge readers into making intertextual connections, and you'll want them to do this in a way that *continues* to be accountable to the texts. Urge them to cite specific instances or examples from a particular text as they make a claim about a character. Model how a club member might “prepare” to raise a particular point in a club conversation by marking beforehand specific spots in *two* or *three* texts that support this point. Also show readers that they may directly quote a line from the text to support or negate a point. The aim is to allow your readers to assimilate information about characters and repetitive plots across a wider *volume* of text than they've previously encountered. As your readers acquire the habit of recalling and navigating a greater volume of text by referencing multiple books in their series, they'll be better prepared to do similar work in longer, more complex novels.

At the end of the unit, you'll expect that partners and clubs will have become seasoned enough in their knowledge of their particular series to give other groups a brief



report about it. These reports might be akin to book talks popularizing the various series the students in your room are reading. Clubs might chart some features of their series, brainstorm a list of reasons why someone would be drawn to reading this series, and provide an introductory account of key characters. Toward the end of the month, you might also have club members list the titles in their series that remain unread so they can plan to read them even after the unit's end.

If your readers are fast enough and if you have enough time in the month to manage this, you might even push a group or two to begin a new series in the last part of the month. Once students have read several (or many) books in one series, it does make sense to push them into another series to reinforce many of the teaching points from the first two parts of the unit and to compare the two series. If students move into a second series with peers, they can now work slightly more independently. While you may still introduce students to the first book in the series, you may also prompt them to revisit the classroom charts, class read-aloud work, and their own writing about reading as a way to revisit all they have learned about reading in a series. In addition to revisiting earlier teaching with greater independence, it can be helpful for readers to notice similarities and differences between different *series*. For example, a club may ponder, "How is Harry Potter different from Percy Jackson? How are they the same?" This encourages readers to carry not only reading strategies but also a knowledge of character types and typical plotlines from series to series and ultimately from book to book.

Some clubs may choose two members to concentrate on a couple books in one series, while the other members concentrate on two books in another series, to get lots of ideas going. Some clubs may opt to focus on character similarities and differences across series, while others may prefer to focus on the big ideas. Yet other clubs may focus their comparisons on books of a particular kind—series that are funny, series that get our hearts racing, detective series. Throughout, you'll want to continue to support the work readers do, while also encouraging their independence.

You might want to remind readers that series books, just like single books, share certain factors that make them particularly powerful. We can read series noticing how secondary characters affect the main character, for example. Noticing patterns in the story and then considering the underlying reasons for them is sophisticated, rich work. Your kids may need a lot of support during conferences and reminders during club reading time to move beyond noticing and naming to thinking about the underlying reasons. Again, you'll want to encourage and support students' use of Post-its to hold on to their ideas so they can talk and write about them more readily. Then, too, you'll want to support readers as they think now across several series to notice that sometimes two authors explore different aspects of a similar topic. One author may be interested in what tests friendships, while another may explore the ways in which friendships are unshakable sources of support when we struggle with family.

Throughout this unit, as you confer with clubs and encourage them to provide textual evidence for their ideas, you might encourage readers to extrapolate these ideas to the world around them. You can help them move beyond noticing and commenting within the story to commenting on the world at large. To help with this work, you



could use prompts such as, “So, what does this make you think about poverty now?” or “Does this book or series help you think differently about best friends?”

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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You will have to informally assess your readers by looking at reading notebooks and logs and listening to partner talk. Think about where your readers are in their development so that you can decide which of the points in the list below you want to use. (Please keep in mind that these are not all the possible teaching points for this unit. This is simply one way it can go. The list works in concert with the discussion above.) If you are teaching sixth graders, they may not need Part One, which recapitulates a character unit of study; you may be able to move right to Part Two.

If, as you look at your students’ Post-its and listen to their partnership and book club talks, you begin to worry about how they are choosing books, monitoring comprehension, and recalling what they are reading, you might find you need to revisit the lessons of Unit One: Agency and Independence to support students in keeping track of how reading is going for them. If they seem to need support in reading between the lines and inferring about characters’ emotions and traits, you may want to turn to the character unit described in *Following Characters into Meaning*, Volume 2 of *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*.

On the other hand, if your kids are already avid series readers and they track characters across hundreds of pages, synthesizing as they go, you may be able to move to the fantasy unit of study or even the interpretation unit of study and show them how to do that reading work in epic series.

After you’ve assessed your readers, if series seems just right, look at the bullet points below and you’ll see that you’ll need to adapt them into teaching points that will reach your specific learners. We’ve written some of them in “lesson” language, and some are informal. You may decide to involve your students in these decisions, inviting them to suggest what kind of teaching will help them see more in the books they are reading.

You also won’t have time for all these teaching points, so consider which will really pay off in connection with the kinds of books your kids are reading. If they are reading more R/S/T books, you might go for more character lessons. If they are reading U/V/W books, you might go for more thematic lessons. If they are reading X/Y/Z books, you might choose some authors’ craft lessons. You could present some of each, of course—but look across your students and talk with your colleagues, especially across grades, so that students are on learning progressions as readers.

### **Part One: Getting to Know Characters (from *Following Characters into Meaning*)**

- Session VIII: “Talking to Grow Theories about Characters.” “We pull in to read, yes, 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."

- Session IX: "Developing Nuanced Theories about Characters." "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. 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.'"
- Session X: "Expecting Complications in Characters." "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."
- Session XI: "Attending to Objects that Reveal Characters." "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."
- Session XII: "Seeing Characters through the Eyes of Others." "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."
- Session XV: "Seeing Texts through the Prism of Theories." "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."
- Session XVIII: "Tracing Ideas through Texts." "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 things that she really wants you to notice, the ones that are critical to understanding the essence of the character and the story."

- Session XX: “Spying on Ourselves as Readers.” “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 out-grow our current habits as readers and thinkers.”

## **Part Two: Moving Deeper into a Series and Analyzing Characters across Series**

- Readers have ideas that grow deeper as they move deeper into a particular series. You will want to model how you deepen an existing idea and show students that they can support their ideas by citing texts: “I think \_\_\_\_, because book one mentions \_\_\_\_.” “My belief in \_\_\_\_ is so much stronger, because in book two \_\_\_\_.”
- Often large serial plots are episodic, like television cartoons. There might be a common enemy that a character is trying to overcome across an entire series, but each book might feature one or more episodes in that developing series.
- Often characters will change dramatically from book to book. The things that we “knew” about them in book one might not always be true in book two.
- Readers can discuss the story in terms of what happened, but they also need to start talking about story in terms of literary merit: “This was a great way for the author to show Harry’s frustration. I like how she showed him thinking about breaking the rules in order to help his friends.”
- It is fair, appropriate, and expected that readers will compare and contrast the various books in the series. Sometimes students feel as if you will view their liking one book more than another as defiance. You can show them how readers and thinkers articulate dislike, discomfort, or unease with a text: “I like book three better than book one because book three had characters that talked a lot, and I felt like I knew them better.”
- Readers understand the structure of narratives or “how stories go.” In series they will see that all of the books in the series follow a pattern. They can use this understanding to help them fight their way through tough portions of text.
- Readers of series books put themselves on a quest to discover the characters, setting, and problem when they start a book. “There are things we already know

from earlier in the year about approaching books, and those things also apply when we are starting series books. In book one, especially, we've got to read in a way that allows us to understand and remember things about the characters, the setting, and the problem. One way that we can do that quickly is to pay attention to what people tell the main character early in the book. When characters are talking to the main character in series books, they are really talking to us. As the main character learns things, this gives us an advantage as readers, because we are learning things too."

- Readers keep all of their strategies in mind and they use the best ones for the job at hand. "Readers, series books give us a chance to use the reading muscles that we have worked hard to develop across this year. They also give us the unique opportunity to make some choices about when we will use particular strategies to help us out as we enter the world of the story. As you look around the strategies that we have on our charts, I want you to notice how I have some listed as things that you might want to do at the beginning of a book. I've also got a list of things that you can try if you are confused or if you don't know who is who. Several strategies we know fall into the category of when I want to identify a big idea. As I reader, I can decide what job I am doing inside my book, and I can choose to use the strategy that is going to help me most in the work that I want to do."
- Readers understand that most stories go a certain way; they deepen their understanding by taking advantage of this predictability. "We have spent a part of this week looking back at old strategies to help our reading. Looking back at old experiences can help our reading just as much! All books start out by introducing us to a world with new people, places, and problems. As a result, we can expect to learn those things within the first few pages of any book that we read. Books proceed when the character tries to do something in order to solve his or her problem. We know that in the middle of the book is where all of that action lives, and books come to a conclusion when a character resolves the major issue at hand. Because we know books unfold in this way, we can predict the plot turns in the book pretty easily; this allows us as readers to do the deeper work of asking why or how these things are happening!
- Readers consider common themes related to character challenges, problems, and struggles. "When we read series books, you will notice that there are ideas, themes, or motifs that are present in lots of different books. For example, one theme that we see lots in movies and shows is this idea that to grow up, you must face your fears and do things that might be hard sometimes. This is a common theme. It happens in Harry Potter, in Scooby Doo, in Pokemon, in Naruto—almost everywhere! Knowing the theme at work in the book that we are reading allows us to pay attention to parts of the book that we know will be

significant. If growing up, for example, requires one to face one's fears, I know that I should be reading and paying careful attention to what the characters fear and how they develop the courage to face those fears. Those are the ideas that I can bring to my group talk! Those ideas can be captured on Post-its, in group discussions, or both."

- When readers discuss, they use evidence from the text to back up their ideas. "Series books are full of so many events and people that can really move us as readers. People really get into their characters. Think about Harry or Bella. People love them. When we talk about people that we love, we need to be able to back up our opinions with specific evidence, and the best way to do that in series books is to go right back to the text. To say, 'I think that Bella Swan makes bad choices,' can be so much stronger if you are able to find an example of a bad choice in the text and explain the example to your listener. To do this, readers hold on to their ideas while they read, and they notice places in the text where those ideas are true. You can note those places on Post-its and mention them in club conversations."
- "As readers get deeper into their stories, they ask themselves, 'What stands in my character's way?' or, 'How might this be resolved?' In order to make authentic predictions, readers must try to fully understand the challenges that a character faces. Most books don't have simple problems; the more you read, you learn that problems often get complicated and have many levels. A character might have missing parents, trouble in school, and problems with a teacher. All of these problems complicate one another, and not all of them are solved easily in all books, but as a clever reader, it's your job to try to solve the problem before the character. One easy way to do this is to imagine the character as a friend and create advice that you would give to that friend. 'I notice that \_\_\_\_ seems to be in your way. Here is one way that I would resolve your problem.'"

### **Part Three: Reading with Increased Expertise and Power**

- Readers start later books in the series with everything that they bring with them from the earlier books. "Starting the later books in a series allows us to ask ourselves, 'What changes across these books and what remains the same?' Remember how excited people were for *Iron Man 2* or every time there is a new episode of *Family Guy*? That same feeling applies to starting another book in a series. There is already a ton of information we know about the characters and locations. Even though we want to tear into the new book to find out what happens next, we can slow down in the very beginning to think about what happened last time and set up some expectations for this new episode."

- Readers can revisit and update their theories about a character by citing new information gained from the information presented in a later text. “Remember how in books we get ideas about characters? Well, entering the second book gives us an opportunity to sharpen those ideas about our characters, because they change! Sometimes the events of the second book might happen right after the events of the first. Sometimes days, weeks, or even years might pass between the events depicted in the two books. This gives our characters time to grow and change, so as we enter the second book, we can hunt for clues that our character has changed by looking closely at what they do, what they say, and who they hang out with. We can ask ourselves, ‘Is there anything different here? What specific evidence tells me this?’”
- Readers of series books can think about the perspective of a character. “There are things that happen to us that sometimes cause us to change our ideas about things. The same is true for the characters in the series books that we are reading. As big things happen to them, they will change. It’s important for readers to notice those things as they happen and pay attention to our character’s responses to them. With all that’s happening to the characters in your books, some of them are bound to make some changes in their lives. Readers get used to looking for life changes that are made as a result of major events. This work is fun to do, and you start it by simply paying close attention to the events and how the character is different after those events.”
- In club discussions, readers of series books can compare two books in terms of plot, characters, theme, or tone. You can show kids how to look for specific elements of literature in all the books that they read. Because they are in series books now, they can compare these elements across books with relative ease. This is an excellent opportunity for sixth graders to practice this work with the support of a club before they will be asked to do it later in the year with greater complexity. “One smart way that readers engage other readers about books is by talking about and comparing the elements of literature from book to book. For example, I can choose to talk to my group about the tone of our books. In that talk I can give examples, ask questions, and look back at the text. I can do the same with characters, plot or theme. Watch how I do this.”
- Readers of series books often follow plotlines from one text to another. What things were resolved from the last book? Which unresolved things are still lingering? Students know this work well, so you will spend much of your time helping them develop strong predictions for the second book based on unresolved issues from the first. One way that you can do this is to teach students how to form questions leading into the second book. Lots of sixth graders have trouble answering their own questions as they form them, so you will want to show them how.



“Readers bring plot ideas from the first book into the second book! You can think about unresolved issues from the first book. Watch how I pose a question that addresses an unresolved issue from book one. I want you to pay close attention to how I try to answer my own question at the end.”

- Readers can also pay attention to author’s craft as they move from one text to another. How does the author create characters or scenes? How does the author set us up to hear or see what she wants us to see? You will want to model for students how to hold on to and deepen the work they have done on author’s craft before. Reading series books gives students a unique window into the world of craft. Here you will want to remind kids how to speak in specific terms about what an author is doing. “Reading series books allows us to see an author’s style. It’s just like listening to lots of music by the same artist. I don’t even have to hear the words, but I know a new Justin Bieber song when I hear it, because he has a certain style. His beats sound a certain way, his videos all have the same kind of setup. I can say the same about the Black Eyed Peas, all of their beats start out quiet and get louder, they always talk about parties or personal struggles, or they brag about how great they are at dancing. I can do that same work with the series that I’m reading by thinking about this author’s style. I notice that her characters talk a lot or that she spends the first pages of each chapter describing the setting. Readers spend their time looking at, thinking about, and discussing an author’s style moves, just as they do for a favorite musician.”
  
- Readers notice how a character has grown or stayed the same across the length of a series. We can show students how readers infer what a character might desire from a situation and what that same character might want internally. “Listen to how I think out loud about what my character wants. Do you notice how I’m paying close attention to when those desires change across my books? When those desires change, that gives us a big clue that the character is changing. Vlad used to be the kind of vampire who wanted \_\_\_\_\_. Now that he’s older, he really desires \_\_\_\_\_. This shows me \_\_\_\_\_.”
  
- Readers can examine lessons learned across multiple texts. Does the character learn from each lesson or does he have to learn similar lessons over and over again? How do you know? Here, it is important to show readers how characters and their actions can drive our understanding of the multiple themes that can be drawn out across series books. We started some of this work in earlier units, but now students are looking at characters across multiple texts. “When a character learns a lesson, we can learn lessons too, but also I would like you to watch as I track more than one lesson that the character learns! Also, do you see how I’m careful to think aloud to my partner when my character has to learn the same lesson over and over again? This can tell me a lot about who she is.”

- “When groups talk they can reference more than one text, and when groups disagree, they disagree by citing specific evidence across several of the books that they have read together.”
  
- When experiencing multiple books in a series, readers are able to talk and think about how the characters, events, and issues in the series cause them to think differently about their own lives. As you model this for students be sure to connect the story to your own life, supporting those parallels with text-based evidence. You will also want to be sure to model deeper thematic connections. “Even though she is very different than many of my friends, this character seems to struggle with her insecurities about feeling different like many of my friends do. Page 32 in book one made me really pause and think about my friendships. Check out what she says to her reflection in the mirror.”
  
- Skilled readers understand that when multiple texts share commonalities, those similarities reveal a lot about characters and about the author. Readers write and talk about the *significance* of those commonalities. You will want to model your thinking about similarities across several stories in a series. “In books one, three, four, and five, the author shows Darren growing fiercer and fiercer as he learns more about the world of adults. Maybe the author himself thinks that kids who grow up too fast have to deal with this kind of frustration and sometimes that frustration gets expressed violently.”



## UNIT THREE

# Nonfiction Reading

## *Navigating Expository, Narrative, and Hybrid Nonfiction*

### NOVEMBER

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#### Overview

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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 about your plan for supporting nonfiction reading across the year. You will also want to consider the nonfiction reading that your students will be doing in content-area classrooms—the best way to do this is to spend a portion of a grade team meeting early in the year discussing nonfiction reading and the materials and supports that you want to offer students during the year. If you teach humanities, you may decide to use this nonfiction reading unit to explore a topic or time period from your social studies curriculum, planning read-alouds and library baskets that match that subject. If that is the case, however, you will want to be careful to maintain this as a reading unit, making sure that students have plenty of appropriately leveled materials to read and time in class to do this with your coaching. You need to think about how you'll support your students' interactions with the whole wide world of nonfiction reading: reading to develop their own independent interests as well as reading that is required in other academic arenas.

The Common Core State Standards expect that around 50% of your students' full year will be spent on narrative texts and 50% will be spent on informational texts (this stems from the percentage breakdown of National Assessment of Educational Progress frameworks: fourth grade 50/50, eighth grade 45/55). Since more than 75% of your students' day is spent in other content areas primarily reading nonfiction, to support this expectation a larger percentage of this entire reading workshop calendar is focused on "literature" reading and our content-area curricular calendar focuses almost totally on "informational" reading. As your school shifts into more and more content-area

reading and writing work, we intend that this unit and the one to follow will provide even more support with nonfiction reading that spans your students' school day. As you think about your instruction across the year in nonfiction reading, help your team decide which strategies for reading nonfiction will be supported in the social studies and science classrooms at your school and which will be taught in-depth in ELA.

In this section of the curricular calendar, 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 an interesting fact or to follow the features of the text, but rather to learn all that the author wants to teach. This discussion is aligned with *Navigating Nonfiction*, a two-volume unit of study within *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*. 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 (Unit Four) focuses on teaching students to increase their expertise with interpretation, cross-text comparisons, synthesis, research, and nonfiction projects (level 4 strategies and skill in Webb's "depth of knowledge" hierarchy).

For students to be able 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 will therefore 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 help them discern that infrastructure, they will be able to glean what matters most even from 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 that students know this and use this knowledge to help them approach texts differently after ascertaining their structure. In this unit, you'll teach students to become expert at explicit and implicit structures of texts.

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## Have a Sense of the Entire Unit while Planning and Gathering Materials

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The unit highlights the importance of structures and channels students use to read texts of a particular structure or portions of it, noting that structure. You'll need to decide whether to start by channeling students toward expository nonfiction or narrative nonfiction (what the NAEP calls *literary nonfiction*). For a number of reasons, we encourage you to start by spotlighting expository nonfiction. Not only will this feel fresher to your students, but also there tends to be more accessible texts available in this structure. Then, too, beginning with expository nonfiction will put you in a position to recruit 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 the first volume 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 they require a different alertness from the reader. Though the narrative structure of most biographies and true adventures will feel familiar to 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 supplied with 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. 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 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 includes 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 in their *Units of Study for Reading & Writing* catalog. Please contact us with more book suggestions that keep up 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 1 of *Navigating Nonfiction*, Lucy Calkins and Kathleen Tolan use a collection of texts for modeling purposes, including *Bugwise*, on insects. You can find a list of recommended read-aloud texts for this unit on our website and on the DVD that accompanies *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*. In general, we recommend choosing texts that are lively, accessible, and 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 where the ideas and categories of information are explicit and others where 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, 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. 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—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 during these next months, in order 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 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 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 multiple copies in your library, look for ones that:

- Have a clear organizational infrastructure. (Get these into the hands of your less proficient students to read first.)
- Are at difficulty levels students can read with fluency, comprehension, and accuracy.
- Are highly engaging texts.

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

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To start this work, you will teach text-previewing strategies, a level 3 skill in Norman Webb's “depth of knowledge” hierarchy. You'll let students know that even before immersion in the text, readers use headings, subheadings, font differences, and other visual cues to get “the 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 of 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. 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 Volume 1, Session I, 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 nonfiction 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, asking students to 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 the Revolutionary War in general. It’s about the role of women.” “This looked like an all-about-sharks text but it actually *compares* different sharks from around the world.’

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 students approach expository texts. In this way, you'll 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 exposition 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 emphasized in the Common Core State Standards. So in your next lesson, you'll probably want to 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 has already been 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 students 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 sidetracked 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 rounds 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*). 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 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” (p. 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 on strategies they have learned in prior units. They’ll want to add what they’re learning now to a growing repertoire that includes such things 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 they are applying old strategies to new work. You’ll meanwhile want to encourage them to read broadly, learning as much as they can about any single topic before moving on to a new one.

As your readers become expert on subjects by reading whole books and then trying to read 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 want to know how 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 partner. 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 fingers and arm gestures. You might teach that when partners meet, instead of just saying what they have learned, they:

- Refer to 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 one another and by explaining how those pictures 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.

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’ll want to teach students to 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 based on the text is through partnership conversations about 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 company of a partner enables collaborative response to texts, but you want to 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 thought prompts that might help students phrase responses to the text. For example, the thought prompts “the text says \_\_\_\_ and I wonder \_\_\_\_” and “the part about \_\_\_\_ seems to fit with the central idea that \_\_\_\_” not only will structure and channel a response to the text but also are 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, see Volume 1, Session VII, of *Navigating Nonfiction*.

Students will naturally question the information they are reading in expository texts. “Why does the male emperor penguin 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 not only to 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 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 it is undertaken collaboratively with a partner rather than in solitude by a lone reader—readers need to read for implication and for the possibility of applying what they know to their lives (the Common Core State Standards highlight this as *be aware of the relevance and significance of what they read*).

The Common Core State Standards expect middle school students not only to read and comprehend nonfiction but also to analyze, with increasing sophistication, how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text. By the end of sixth grade students are expected to analyze how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced and elaborated in a text; by the end of eighth grade students should be able to analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events. As your students move through the first part of this unit, gathering greater control of reading for boxes-and-bullets, not just tiny facts, they will be primed to step back and think about larger points of view evident in the text. For instance, you might teach students to look across several of their “boxes” and then ask, “How do most of these fit together?” Some students will benefit from literally sorting them and noticing whether the article or text has one main idea or several that change over time. After this physical or mental sorting, to teach your students to analyze in the way the Common Core State Standards are suggesting, have them go back and talk through the text with a partner as if they are giving a tour. Students meeting sixth-grade standards, for example, might state the event or idea first, then say how the

book introduced and elaborated on it. They might use conversation prompts like these: “One big idea in this book seems to be \_\_\_\_\_. At first the author says \_\_\_\_\_, then s/he adds to/changes it a little when writing \_\_\_\_\_. Then s/he writes \_\_\_\_\_. Finally, she \_\_\_\_\_.” These prompts could begin in conversation, but eventually move to longer writing in students’ notebooks.

Finally, you may find it useful to teach a lesson or two designed to help readers tackle challenging words that the Common Core State Standards call “domain language.” Some of this instruction will reiterate decoding strategies students have been learning for narrative reading, 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.” 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 notation. 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” (emphasis added).

Even when the text makes overt efforts such as the above to give readers direct accessibility to unfamiliar vocabulary, our readers will often resist adopting the new words they see in print. Technical vocabulary, with its infrequent everyday 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 about these topics, so that students may have the chance to articulate 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 whales look like. Some readers need explicit instruction in order to learn to “read” carefully illustrative portions of the text (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 for the difficult words or concepts that the text introduces them to.

## Part Two: Navigating Narrative and Hybrid Nonfiction Texts

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In this second part of the unit, you will teach students to read narrative nonfiction, paying attention to structure and using story grammar to synthesize and determine importance of large stretches of text. Like expository texts, narrative nonfiction is shaped according to a template. This one is familiar and easier for many adolescents



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 on to the information in 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 one knows about a topic to anticipate how a text might unfold. If a reader is reading an expository text about a shark, the reader can think, "I've read other books on sea 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 in a way that 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 President Abraham Lincoln, they'll access their prior knowledge about him and possibly even about the Civil War. 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 will likely have noticed that many—even most—nonfiction texts are hybrids, containing expository chunks as well as narrative chunks. 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. 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 many of the texts they read tell the story of people and their achievements. The structure is similar in fiction. Characters have traits and motivations, and as they interact with one another and their environment, they come to face challenges or obstacles that the story highlights and that 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 of *Navigating Nonfiction*, Volume 2,



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 are “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 nonspeaking/-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 on to big trajectories in a text rather than simply fact-mining to get “notes.” Session IX in *Navigating Nonfiction*, Volume 2, 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 text to many 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 a “big idea” lesson 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 (“this text [this part of the text] is mostly about . . .”) and then add a more inferential retelling (“and the big new thing it teaches me is . . .”). Alternatively, a reader could say, “And the big way this adds to what I already knew

about this subject is. . . .” For instance, the story of Molly Pitcher captures a brave woman moving beyond the role her gender placed on her. It also teaches a reader about war and survival during the American Revolution.

Just as our students can sometimes make unsupported inferences, authors of non-fiction can sometimes do the same. In their love (or disdain) for their subject, biographers sometimes claim a particular character trait or the importance of a particular event without backing it up. The Common Core State Standards expect that middle school students should be able to trace and evaluate arguments in informational writing, and this part of the unit feels like a useful point to discuss this. Even if there are no clear biases in texts your students are reading, the ability to walk back through why someone believes what they do is a worthy skill that will serve your students well for the rest of their lives.

To begin, you may return to a page in your read-aloud in which the author describes a strong character trait (“she was very brave,” “he was so cruel,” and so on). Remind your students that earlier in the year they came up with theories about their characters by working first with details and then building ideas, and suggest that now you will work backward to see how the author accomplished this same thing. In the text you are using for your demonstration, start with the trait the author is claiming and act very suspicious: “Now wait a minute, the author is saying Molly Pitcher is very brave. But I don’t know, she might have been brave, but maybe she was just caring, or maybe she was foolish to run into the field like that. I don’t want to just go ahead and believe everything this book tells me.” Next, teach your students to go back and look for the steps the author took to make that claim—a “tour of the book” similar to the work you did near the end of Part One (“first the author wrote . . . then . . . then. . .”).

If your students take to this work quickly and well, add how careful readers of informational texts pay attention to ideas that authors clearly support but also notice ones they don’t. If, when walking back through details in the text, it is hard to figure out why the author said Molly Pitcher was brave and one could just as easily think she is foolish, then it is right for a reader to note that. You might teach your students to jot a Post-it: “This seems unsupported because. . . .”

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 minibiography, 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 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

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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 based on 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 create 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 *Oh, Rats!*, 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:

### Rats and People Have a Long History

- Rats moved across the world because of ships.
- People hurt rats, but rats adapt very quickly.
- Rats have hurt people, people do not adapt as quickly.

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 information 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 detract from the flow and power of the read-aloud. Quick moments of "turn and tell

your partner” or “stop and jot” help you manage students’ responses efficiently. 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 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 your 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 and how 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 every day you read that book aloud. 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; alternatively, during whole-class conversations, students can reference their diagrams to explain, compare, and contrast.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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One of the crucial decisions to make as you embark on a nonfiction reading unit is whether to *have* a nonfiction reading unit. It’s unquestionable that kids need to become powerful nonfiction readers. But it is questionable whether or not your school has

enough books for kids to grow as readers. If their reading volume drops for several weeks, all the gains you'll make in expository and narrative nonfiction skills will be offset by losses in reading rate and stamina. Students can't get repeated practice and learn to synthesize rapidly on the run unless they are getting a lot of reading done. So look at your library with a sharp eye, and ask, "Do I have the books for this?" We hope the answer is yes! If the answer is "almost," then take a group of kids to the public library and get more books, and invite students to lend books from their home collections as well. Don't settle for poor-quality xeroxes. Allington shows that kids move up levels by doing a lot of reading, not by poring over one or two page texts. If you can't assemble a lot of nonfiction, you may want to transfer this unit to a content-area class (social studies, for example) or reconsider the placement of this unit in the year (save it until you've been able to assemble nonfiction) or share books with another classroom.

Assuming you've gathered sufficient nonfiction books for your kids to be able to read with high volume, then you'll be able to focus on comprehension skills in the unit. All the time, though, watch how your kids are moving through texts. If they stagnate in texts that are too hard, students often either begin to skip the hard parts or spend hours on a few pages. Keep your eyes open for what parts of the texts kids are taking notes on and talking about, and try to help them monitor how much of the page they are synthesizing, as well as how steadily they are reading across pages. You'll also want to listen in to their partner conversations in which they teach each other about what they learned. If you see readers talking animatedly, using their hands to gesture, pointing to significant pages in the books, flipping through notes to remind themselves of details, then all is probably well. If you see your partners finishing their conversations in just a minute or two or coming to conversations without a stack of books, notes, and Post-it flags, you may want to listen very closely to see whether students need coaching in how to synthesize main ideas, how to convey the details that support those ideas, and how to monitor whether they're in a book that is a good match for them. Remember that often young readers read nonfiction at a lower level than they read fiction, so you and your students will have to constantly pay attention to monitoring comprehension and choosing books wisely.

Although there are no teaching points related to this below, we expect kids to keep going with their fiction chapter books at the same time, unless some of them choose dense narrative nonfiction such as biography that they'll read at the same rate. Chapter books are their long-distance training. Readers will keep up their stamina, they'll keep up their reading levels, if they balance reading narrative at home with nonfiction in school—and they'll probably need some time to talk to a partner each week about their novels, which will give you a chance to listen in to their conversations, monitor their reading logs, and make sure their fiction reading is staying strong.

## **Part One: Expository Nonfiction**

- Session I: "Readying Our Minds to Read Nonfiction." "Although one great non-fiction reader is very different from another, today I want to teach you that all

great nonfiction readers read 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 think, ‘This book is mostly about \_\_\_\_ and then it will also tell \_\_\_\_.’”

- Session II: “Looking for Structure within a Nonfiction Text.” “Another way readers can hold on to what we are learning is that when we come to the end of a chunk of text—or when our mind is brimful—we can pause and say to ourselves, ‘What did I just read?’ Then we can come up with small summaries of the important stuff. This helps us to recollect what we’ve learned.”
- Session III: “Choosing Appropriate Texts and Reading with Stamina in Nonfiction.” “As nonfiction readers learn new ways to make sense of their texts, we hold on to everything we know about good nonfiction reading. We add ‘tools’ for reading nonfiction to our toolkit, using these tools as needed when we encounter difficulty.”
- Session IV: “Becoming Experts and Teaching Others from Nonfiction Texts.” “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.”
- Session V: “Grasping Main Ideas in Nonfiction Texts.” “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.”
- Session VI: “Talking to Grow Ideas about Nonfiction Texts.” “Readers talk to let texts get through to us, to let texts change our minds. We talk to grow ideas.”
- Session VII: “Reading Differently Because of Conversations.” “Whether you are reading nonfiction or fiction texts, it is equally important to talk about those texts with one another, 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

- Session VIII: “Identifying Nonfiction Text Structures and Adjusting Reading.”  
“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). 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!”
- Session IX: “Reading Nonfiction Narratives as Stories with Main Characters.”  
“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.”
- Session X: “Seeking Underlying Ideas in Narrative Nonfiction.” “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.”
- Session XI: “Achievement Texts, Disaster Texts: Templates in Narrative Nonfiction.” “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.”
- Session XII: “Envisioning (and Other Strategies) to Figure Out Unfamiliar Words.” “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 technical word means! One of the ways we can do that is to get a picture in our mind of what’s going on in that part of the story and to think about what would make sense.”



## UNIT FOUR

# Nonfiction Research Clubs

## *Developing Analytical Lenses for Informational Reading*

### DECEMBER

As we have found in fiction book clubs, our middle school students often outgrow themselves very quickly when reading and talking in the company of their peers. Book clubs support both the social aspects of “getting things done” as well as analytical muscles that lead students to read in more thoughtful ways, pushing them to see and think things about their books that they have not before. This year we are suggesting that you draw on some of that enthusiasm and steer it toward the nonfiction reading work your students will be doing. In this unit, you’ll build on all the essential nonfiction comprehension reading skills you taught in the prior unit, and you’ll add new work that teaches students to compare and contrast texts, analyze their claims and arguments, investigate authors’ points of view, critique, and 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 not only to restate the information a text teaches but also to analyze the author’s claims and the validity of the argument presented, as do 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 pore for days over the

illustrations in a book or the few paragraphs of text 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 have shifted to a time now when students and adults need to be able to do research quickly and efficiently. All it takes today to look up the latest genome project or 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 many 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 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, about which they can find lots of information in a few well-chosen books and articles, as well as on a couple of websites—but you'll be teaching them, in this unit, to read rapidly, evaluate and compare resources, and construct in-depth, critical understandings of research topics that feel urgent in their fascination and their application.

It is also of note that this unit, like the one before it, feeds the work your students will do not only in English language arts but in their content-area classes. You might decide, then, that you will share one or both of these units with your science and social studies colleagues and then consider how you will pace this work during the year. Will you tackle this research club work first, and then the following month your science colleague will pick it up and then later social studies? Or perhaps while you launch the year and move into a narrative study in October, your content-area counterparts could be doing some initial nonfiction reading so it is not a "from scratch" exercise when you begin these units of study in November and December. Whatever your choices, the Common Core State Standards expect that reading and writing instruction are infused across the entire school day, so this may be a great time to pull your team together and support one another.

## Have a Sense of the Entire Unit while Planning

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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 and continue through your read-aloud and all-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 to model, you may decide to choose a complex subject and high-level texts, and your modeling might aim to support the highest level of reading for which you think your students can strive. 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 launching them into their independent work. In *Navigating Nonfiction*, you'll see that the texts on penguins used as a model are lively and accessible and support 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 prereading the texts with some of your students.

In Part One, you will also 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 and you'll teach them note-taking strategies and skills that help them write to develop their thinking as they read, gather information from multiple sources, keep track of those sources, and develop the essential skills of researchers.

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, draw conclusions, design their own informed opinions, and apply their newfound knowledge by creating instructional material for their peers and communities.

## Preparing for the Unit

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This unit revolves around thinking and learning derived from reading multiple texts on a single topic, so you'll need to prepare (ideally with your students) text sets on specific topics, ones for which there are already plenty of available books (in your room, school library, or neighborhood library). 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 whether they have any books at home. And they can bring in more than books—they may have model cars from different eras or model WWII planes. Tactile objects can help engage our researchers and convert our classrooms into multimedia research sites.

For the shared topic you'll use 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 a 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 trustworthy site. 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 the research process, so take a couple of days to let students browse the text sets you have available, 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 more than one group takes on the same topic. You'll be talking up the upcoming work, inviting students to share their passions and give voice to their urgent musings, and ultimately forming research groups that feel as if they were chosen by the students 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**

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Before the first lesson, you'll have coached students into work groups that make sense, using what you know of their reading levels, their friendships, their work habits, and their interests and expertise. In your first lesson, then, you'll probably want to 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 in order to plan a learning journey.

You'll probably want to invite your students to use their pens as they work, making flowcharts or a table of contents or other visible plans for the order of the texts 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 subheadings, 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 because it is an easier reading level or has more background information. More specific texts, or ones that tackle a narrower subtopic, might be delayed until researchers have constructed some shared knowledge.

An important aspect of your teaching in this unit is reminding students to use the repertoire of comprehension strategies they already know. "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, recalling this teaching point. "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 them down as a list on a whiteboard or chart.

The list your readers generate will be specific to your own whole-class topic. If you've chosen "Antarctic Exploration" 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 about one topic to 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 (e.g., a chart) on which these categories are listed as headings, 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 teach their fellow researchers what they are learning, in order 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 their various features as they "teach" their topics to partners. Teach students also that nonfiction readers have certain habits that make us experts. "A very important one," 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 as an expert gardener's vocabulary would have words like *compost*, *nitrates*, *dead-heading*, *pruning*, *perennials* and an expert on skateboarding's vocabulary would probably be full of words like *pivot*, *wheelie*, *slalom*, *kick flip*, *long board*, they too need to read to pick up the lingo, or technical vocabulary (what the Common Core calls "domain language"), that will make them *sound* like experts on their topic.

Next, you'll probably want to 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 deeper about that, we make connections, we ponder, we consider the *implications* of what we read. Usually, you'll teach, it is important to take some of what we're thinking, jot it down, and then write more deeply about it. You'll want your readers to literally "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. You might teach certain thought prompts: "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 \_\_\_\_.” “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 instead they may make charts and diagrams that let them gather evidence for a few important ideas and categories of information. Teach them as well to teach their fellow researchers about the significance of each new text by highlighting the particular contribution that text makes to their shared knowledge.

You also want readers moving between texts, catching any conflicting information that they chance to find: “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. This can also be the time to teach students to “read” primary sources and to contrast them 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 explaining 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 them closely. 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 (in which case it is a primary source) or whether it reports other texts or other people’s experiences (in which case it is probably secondary).

As your students develop their expertise as researchers, help them develop their expertise as collaborative club members as well. Teach clubs to talk often about their topic, retelling the boxes-and-bullets they’ve read on a particular day to club members, sharing illustrations and charts that reveal more information about a topic, comparing and contrasting illustrations from different texts, and 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 them. You will want to help clubs remember the protocols that make for good membership: to listen carefully, to take turns talking, to plan and divide roles.

If you want to establish a close connection to writing—to teach students to convey the ideas they are speaking about in writing—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 really 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) their opinions. During their club conversations, teach students that each member might state an opinion as a “thesis statement” or “claim”—for example, “Cleopatra was a more effective ruler than King Tut”—and then supply two or three examples 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 whether they can add evidence in support of it—or provide evidence that challenges this claim. Though this work will be done orally, this is the essential foundation for opinion writing (and in 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.

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

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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 notice 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 make us feel terribly 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 animals, that this one made them outraged at greenhouse gases, and that this one, on the other hand, made them somewhat afraid of polar bears.

A second element of this lesson, which you can do in the same or in the next session, is to help students note craft moves—*how* exactly 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. This may be news to some students, the idea that any nonfiction text is simply one author’s perspective on the truth. Since your readers have multiple nonfiction sources on an identical topic to consider, they’ll be better placed to evaluate the different ways 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 presents 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 for 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 author point of view rather than as consumers of information.

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 those with .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, how to visit museums. Teach them to look inside and outside books to pursue their interests and seek knowledge.

As the well-deserved celebration at the conclusion of this invigorating scholarship, you might set 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 club members 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. Club members might each take one part of their studied topic and teach that part to others. They may make a poster 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 create 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.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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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 with the third part of that 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 access a single nonfiction text at their level with some ease, using the text features to navigate the material, reaching for a pen to quickly jot down a main idea or two, and turning to a partner to talk about what they've learned as they finish reading. If your kids 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: Nonfiction Reading: Navigating Expository, Narrative, and Hybrid 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 inform your conferring and small-group work with those children.

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 them 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.

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, have your students also read fiction independently during the unit.

You may want to adapt these plans, depending on the particular needs of your students. 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 journey that will inevitably help them emerge as more powerful and independent readers and thinkers.

### **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 not only need to collect but 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 the authors include and how those things 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 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

## *Tackling Complex Texts*

### JANUARY

#### Overview

At first glance, historical fiction may turn some of your middle school students (or even you) off. It's set in a time and a place the reader has never inhabited; the characters become complexly entangled in both historical and social issues; and the events of the story are based on real historical events. But historical fiction is also deeply romantic and wildly exciting, with shifting dramatic plotlines and adventurous characters. There are reasons that *Titanic* was one of the the most popular teen movies of all time (market research showed that preteen girls watched it on average twelve times in the first year of its release). Films like *Gladiator*, *Troy*, and *300* have also been box office smashes—they play into our urge to be lifted out of our ordinary lives and imagine lives of great adventure and heroism.

Historical fiction creates an opportunity to teach your students to tackle complex texts with their peers. Because historical fiction is inherently complicated, 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. This challenge is a good stepping stone to more complicated texts your students will encounter as their schooling continues into high school and college. The Common Core State Standards expect students to read increasingly challenging books, something matching students to levels and moving them ever upward addresses. This leveled movement, we all know, only comes from volumes of reading and clear, expert instruction in ways of thinking inside books. Historical fiction provides a dramatically engaging backdrop for learning complex skills.



Your goal is for your students to emerge from this unit of study as more knowledgeable readers who have new confidence in tackling complicated literature. They will learn how to build collective interpretations, how to listen closely to one another as they read, and how to carry ideas over time and across more than one text.

## Have a Vision for the Entire Unit while Planning

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The essentials of this unit closely follow the unit that was researched and documented in the *Tackling Complex Texts: Historical Fiction Book Clubs* volume of *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*. 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. The Common Core State Standards expect students to come prepared for conversations, have collegial discussions, pose and respond to questions with elaboration, and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing.

Part Two focuses on interpretation, especially paying attention to perspective and point of view, and on carrying ideas across a text and supports the Common Core State Standards expectations that students to be able to determine themes or central ideas of texts and how they are conveyed through particular details and to explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

Part Three helps readers move across texts, both fiction and nonfiction, developing their thematic understanding and potential as social activists; it builds on the cross-textual analysis discussed in the Common Core State Standards strand “Integration of Knowledge and Ideas.”

At times we also make parallels with the historical fiction segment of *Units of Study for Teaching Writing*. Therefore, we also offer a fourth possible part, or collection of teaching points, that focus on reading as a writer and thinking about the writer’s craft.

## Through Teaching Historical Fiction We Must Still Teach Reading

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At the beginning of this unit, you’ll aim to teach readers to read complex texts with deep comprehension. Inevitably, the characters 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, who the characters are, as well as the relationship the characters have to historical tensions. So 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 further synthesize several crucial subplots, some of which might 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 critical analysis and synthesis, envisioning faces new challenges during this month. Readers may already have made a mental movie of their reading before this; in fact you might have taught explicit 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 historical fiction novels, to see and feel the world of their stories. They'll need support to imagine this world from the unlikely perspective of protagonists often markedly different from themselves. It is 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, whose life 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 their understanding and awareness. It will require additional preparation on your part to line up these supplementary textual and media resources, but the payback in terms of students' awareness and understanding of history and their ability to empathize with distant characters will be great and have the added benefit of helping them meet the Common Core State Standards expectation that by the end of seventh grade students will be able to compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.

Inherent in this genre is the potential to overlap and integrate nonfiction texts, possibly from your students' social studies curriculum, keeping in mind that Common Core State Standards on literacy in social studies purposefully mirror the general literacy standards—any work you do to align this study with your students' social studies teacher will pay off across their day. In any case, you will set up intertextual resources for book clubs so that they may look at a specific historical era 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. 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 students 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 the specific historical era in which their multiple books are set will provide its own scaffold.

You'll want each book club to have a text set containing multilevel books dealing with 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 set conform to the reading levels of the students 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 students in that club—this book can be 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 another time period, they also often introduce young readers to large, complicated themes that have recurred in human history and continue to be relevant today. Therefore, while you can expect the book clubs in your room to begin the month with discussions of a main character's problems and progress through the month to tackling complex plots together, you will prepare for the fact that book club conversations toward the *end* of this month will include 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 the 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 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 are recursive across texts and across eras. Courage or friendship, for example, can be themes common in novels about Nazi Europe, westward expansion, or the civil rights movement. You'll want to celebrate that your student, during this unit of study, will realize that reading is about learning how to live.

## Gathering Resources before the Unit Begins—Taking Stock of Your Library

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Before beginning this unit of study, the most important question is this: 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 other researchers like Dick Allington, show that students need to be reading with high volume and high interest all the time—and we know that interest and choice go hand in hand. This means that for this unit, you'll need enough books at your students' just-right levels so that they can still choose books they want to read. Don't put readers in books that they cannot read or don't want to read just so they can take part in the unit. Be particularly thoughtful of the needs of your struggling readers, who need to be reading a lot. More than others, these students 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 you have available so you can lure your students to them. You might include some time travel books such as *Magic Treehouse* for students reading at lower levels.

Throughout the month, of course, you will keep your eye on students who don't seem well matched and doublecheck 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

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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 synthesize the clues about what kind of place this is. That means not only identifying the time and place (a small town in Germany) but also paying attention to details that clue the reader in to what *kind* of place this is—what the mood or atmosphere is. For instance, in *Rose Blanche*, the town is beginning to have trucks full of soldiers, 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. For stories in the R/S/T band and the bands above, the setting becomes significant. It may even function as part of the problem that a character has to overcome—sometimes by *leaving* the setting, as in stories that describe Jewish families escaping or people who lived during the Irish famine migrating to a new land. The setting might also change completely, as the result of an invasion by a hostile enemy or a natural disaster. The setting may operate at a symbolic level too: the dust of the prairie may mean more than simply that the land is dry.

In addition to teaching your students to be alert for clues about the physical setting, you may also want to explore the setting as an emotional space as the story progresses. Is this the kind of town in which people are good to each other or where bad things can happen? 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 a character getting from here to there. 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 the information given 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 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. The Common Core State Standards expect that students can analyze how a particular sentence, paragraph, chapter, or section fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the ideas. Taking on what

can at first feel like challenging practice will help your readers emerge from their study of settings more prepared to tackle the complex shifts in settings in any novel.

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

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 but also about the kind of people who will occupy the story and what happens to them. In these novels, as in all good novels, details matter. If you learn something on page 2, or in Chapter 1, it's because you're going to need it later in the story. Historical fiction, at the levels at which your students 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 and tell them they can keep track of these details by pinning them on an imaginary feltboard. 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 their way of life—and the associated challenges and conflicts. Some struggling readers find that talking about a film clip raises their engagement and their ability to pay attention to detail, and they are then able to bring this engagement 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 and 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 again. This is key, because one thing you'll be teaching your readers here 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 your students know how to do this. A reading curriculum, like a writing curriculum, spirals. As students move up levels, and into harder books, they'll find that they need to consciously harness comprehension strategies. You'll model much of that crucial reading work, so that your students learn to use multiple strategies to make sense of what they are reading. They'll learn to use their pencils as they read. They'll learn to reread on the run, which must become automatic if they are to tackle the kinds of complicated texts that await them.

Timelines are 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 readers of historical fiction to understand that the characters exist in relation to history. Ultimately, this understanding will help readers with any



complex novel, as characters never exist in a vacuum but are affected by the social pressures, community norms, and forces around them. Historical novels simply require readers to wrap our minds around a greater *volume* of content. There are 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 one another or that they are intertwined.

Next, readers are probably ready to start thinking about the point of view of the main character and how that point of view may be radically different from the reader's point of view. That is, the main character experiences the world differently than the reader does. 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 man who stops Annemarie and Ellen from running in the street is a Nazi soldier, not their friendly local policeman, and that Ellen is Jewish, 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.

## Part Two: Interpreting Complex Texts

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As the unit unfolds, your readers will embark on the heady intellectual work of interpretation. It's easy for students to get caught up in the action of historical fiction and in 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 too is historical fiction. 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. Moreover, these books aren't just about one idea. 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 the central, or main, idea of 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 and then across texts and then 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 they 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 intellectual 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 the history that 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 this union. 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 the book, so that what you might think is important, such as how Annemarie struggles to be a good friend, might be different from what I notice, which is that she is a better friend than she is a sister. I 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—else they'll be waiting for you to tell them what to think!

You'll probably want to follow this lesson with one in which you encourage your readers to pause as they read and linger over certain passages—usually the dramatic or surprising ones, where there is a sense that what is happening is connected to other parts of the story or could be tremendously important to the character's development. It's as if those parts of the story are written in bold. Readers linger over those parts, jot down their thoughts about them, reread them with their clubs, compare their thinking about them, 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 as they read.

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 details together. 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 begin to keep track of details that support those ideas, as well as details that lead them to related or revised ideas. They'll learn to be alert readers, just as alert fans notice so much more at a baseball game than inexperienced viewers do. So you'll teach your readers to wear special lenses as they develop ideas—lenses that help them 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." That way, clubs don't end up losing track of their ideas or losing their focus.

Although the main "lesson" of this part is that kids value their own ideas about books, that they hold onto them as they read, grounding them in details, deepening them, and sharing them with others, it's important, too, that students 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, that to read a book with complexity is to be open to a journey of thought, not just a single thought. That is, we'll want to nudge kids to remain open to new ideas as they read—and also 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 your mind as you read. 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 can parallel some of the work they do in social issues book clubs—a kind of 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 in order to form a new, more nuanced one. The book club work will be tremendously important here as your kids learn that our ideas are more powerful in coalition than when we work alone. Indeed, one of the most significant lessons of this unit, and we hope one of the most lasting, will be that students' greatest strength lies in building thoughts off their talk with one another. 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. And so you'll 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

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The Common Core State Standards ask students not only to 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 compared with how Annemarie feels? 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—helping your readers 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 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 consider who has power, how power is visible, the many forms of power, and how power shifts. For instance, power is not always about weapons or physical strength. In the

end, it is not physical prowess that defeats the Germans' attempt to round up the Jews in Denmark in *Number the Stars*. It is the power of community, and integrity, and collective courage.

If you haven't done it yet, by now you'll want to make sure that your students 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 make big book orders. You could simply type up some statistics or download some simple fact sheets or articles. Knowing how many students 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 students will have learned that the books they are reading are based on real 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 Rose Blanche'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 firsthand.

As your readers add nonfiction to their reading, teach them to begin to talk about ideas across texts—both fiction and nonfiction. The idea that war teaches students to grow up fast, for instance, is true not only in *Number the Stars* but also in *The Butterfly* and in images you can 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 don'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 contextually and in comparison with other texts—to create virtual text sets. You'll teach your readers, then, to look closely at something the Common Core State Standards emphasize, which is *how* a text develops a theme—the similarities and differences between characters and places—in order to compare and contrast, to analyze and use details as evidence for their ideas.

There is another kind of comparison that you can teach your readers to make as well, and that is the art of the allusion. Sometimes, readers want to say so much about a story, yet they struggle to find the words that can contain something 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 posit 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 students 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 they don't have to be humiliated by seeing them every day? How are we affected by that decision and by the school's response of firing her? What can we learn from these choices? How about when Annemarie decides, in a moment of high stakes, to rip off her best friend's necklace, the Star of David, that 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-Alouds to Support the Unit

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Plan to use your read-alouds to anchor this unit. If you decide to focus your read-alouds 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 good ones we recommend) and also reading aloud several other books during the unit, of varied lengths, all about World War II. If your students are reading books from a variety of time periods, your class read-alouds could also switch time periods as well.

As you make these decisions, consider that your read-alouds are touchstones for the critical reading and interpretive work you teach. Your interactive read-alouds might feature prompts like these:

- “So the main character is facing a big problem. Turn and talk to your partner 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 we 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 with other experiences or situations we’ve read about?” (intertextuality)

## Literacy across the Day: Ideas for Integrating the Unit with Social Studies

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You may decide to partner with your students' social studies teacher to teach social studies and historical fiction reading alongside each other. Also, in the corresponding *writing* unit, students will be collecting as many new insights as possible about the

time period they will ultimately write about; 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, spending time talking in partnerships and clubs, and creating whole-class word walls and charts gathering current 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”), of which one might be the Civil War. So your read-alouds will highlight books set within the Civil War.

Of course, just because you are studying the Civil War, doesn't mean your students can't take on related but broader topics in book clubs, ones that focus on stories of “war” or “oppression” or “change.” This kind of intertextual reading supports a richer understanding of historical fiction in general. Another way to go, if you feel your social studies materials are inadequate, if they are not broad or supportive enough, is to lean more heavily on the reading workshop work paired with this 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 students' 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, try to include some texts that explain these events or 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 takes some work to gather these resources. You may find that you need to visit your local library or rotate baskets of materials with other teachers at your grade level. Remember that many students read nonfiction at lower levels than they read fiction, so try to gather easier texts. If students are reading nonfiction texts, they may need to be reminded to look for the main idea.

As you approach this unit, it will be important for you to read this entire discussion, not just the teaching points below, because ultimately kids learn through the work they do, not the words out of your mouth. The really important thing in a unit of study is that you create opportunities for kids to engage in work that matters. These calendar discussions can help you issue the wide generous invitation that rallies kids not only to work with heart and soul but also to 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 revolves around the responsive instruction you provide as you move kids along trajectories of skill development. This part of your teaching relies on your assessing your students often—not in big fancy ways, but by watching the work they do—and on your 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, 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* (not can't) do, it is also showing you what *you* can do. From your attentiveness to student work, from your persistent attempts to reach students one way or another, and from your inventive responses to what they do, you'll find that your teaching becomes a course of study for you as well as for your students.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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The teaching points below are taken from the *Tackling Complex Texts: Historical Fiction in Book Clubs* volume of *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*. As you embark on this unit, you might reference those lessons. Historical fiction is a complex genre, and book clubs allow kids to support one another's comprehension. Of course, some clubs, and kids, 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 at the beginning, middle, or nearing the end of their book.

If you see some readers 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. Kids 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 students 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 teaching points of the first part into a string of minilessons on the different ways the historical context, or setting, impacts the character.

If your readers are struggling with critical reading in nonfiction, you will want to emphasize interpretation throughout this unit. They will need it for the interpretation unit that follows. While the interpretive work is in the third part, you might decide to begin this critical reading work earlier, bringing it into your read-alouds where you can coach and support students, 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 part three teaching points and develop them into a string of minilessons, or you might teach additional strategies to support this work. Also, if you know that kids will need additional support, prepare to teach strategy lessons to small groups.

In addition, be sure to keep your eye on your kids' reading logs. As they tackle these complex and sophisticated texts, you want to ensure their volume is not dropping. If you see a dip, if you see students reading fewer pages, then act quickly. Help them 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 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 they are on a pathway that will inevitably help them emerge as more powerful and independent readers and thinkers.

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

- Session I: “Constructing the Sense of Another Time.” “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.”
- Session II: “Collaborating to Comprehend Complex Texts.” “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.”
- Session III: “Synthesizing Story Elements.” “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 imagining that we were 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.”
- Session IV: “Holding On When Time Jumps Back and Forth.” “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.”
- Session V: “Unfolding Characters while Unfolding History.” “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."

- Session VI: "Thinking as Someone Else." "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."
- Session VII: "Scrutinizing, Not Skipping, Descriptions." "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**

- Session VIII: "Authoring Our Own Responses to Texts." "When we read novels, and specifically when we study texts really closely, we are looking at something. And here's 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."
- Session IX: "Making Significance." "Today I want to remind you that thoughtful readers sometimes press the pause button, lingering to ponder what we've read and to 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."
- Session X: "Seeing Big Ideas in Small Details." "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.”

- Session XI: “Forging Trails of Thought as We Read.” “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.”
- Session XII: “Widening the Horizons of Our Thinking.” “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**

- Session XIII: “Strengthening Our Empathy for Quiet Characters.” “Readers, 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. Trying to think about and see a story through the eyes of someone whose perspective is not shown—like trying to see the school through the eyes of a bird—gives us a new way of seeing, and more important, of thinking.”
- Session XIV: “Imagining What’s Possible and Reaching for It.” “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 our 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.”
- Session XV: “Seeing Power in Its Many Forms.” “Readers, 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.”
- Session XVI: “Sparking Nonfiction against Fiction to Ignite Ideas.” “Readers, 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."

- Session XVII: "Finding Themes through Different Texts." "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."
- Session XVIII: "Conveying Complex Ideas Artfully." "If your head is so full of ideas that your chest is welling 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 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."
- Session XIX: "Making a Mark on History." "Readers, 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."



## UNIT SIX

# Developing Analytical Reading Practices

## *Interpretation*

FEBRUARY/MARCH

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### Overview

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By now, your students understand that reading is more than comprehending what is happening in the stories they read. It is considering why events occur the way they do; it is inferring things from the characters' motivations, desires, and emotional states; it is analyzing the impact of settings. And it is doing all of that intellectual work on the run, as the story unfolds. Your instruction has kept pace with the increasing complexity of the books your students have been reading, which means you have taught them to delve ever deeper into more complex narratives and have developed their analytical skills. Your students have, while immersed in stories, become sharper thinkers, living through and among the stories of characters who have come to shape their lives and thinking, just as the literary characters and language of Langston Hughes and Sojourner Truth and so many other authors shaped the heritage and thinking of Dr. Martin Luther King and other important Americans.

In this unit of study, you will sharpen your students' analytical skills even more, teaching them to notice more in the texts they read and to become more nuanced in their language, sharpening their minds for any kind of analytical thinking. You will teach them to observe closely, to understand some of the craft of literature, to support their ideas with finely grained evidence, and to remain open to contradictory ideas. The Common Core State Standards emphasize students' ability to hold one argument up for evaluation while also being able to articulate the counterargument. Deep interpretation is that process of developing an argument, remaining aware of and influenced by counterarguments, and ultimately illuminating your reading and your own life with new and more complex understandings.

Essentially, you'll teach your students 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 mind. All the time, you will be training them to be analytical and persuasive and 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, so ideas live in more than one book, and 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 their arguments (as in defending their ideas, not fisticuffs!) to be more nuanced and deliberate and finely calibrated.

This interpretation unit makes the most sense for readers who are reading books at level R and above and who are regularly making inferences about the characters' emotions, traits, and changes. 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 making inferences about the characters and synthesizing the narrative elements in the stories they read. If, for instance, a student is reading *The Lightning Thief* and has no trouble keeping track of the characters, figuring out where the story is taking place, and what kind of boy Percy is at the beginning and end of the story, that student is also ready to realize that *The Lightning Thief* is the kind of novel that suggests important themes—it teaches us how to shape our own character. If, on the other hand, when you talk to that student about *The Lightning Thief*, 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-being-surprised-by-the-plot, then you may want to turn to Unit Two, Investigating Characters across Series, in this sixth-grade curricular calendar or Volume 2 of *Following Characters into Meaning in Units of Study for Teaching Reading*, 3–5.

## Have a Sense of the Entire Unit while Planning

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The unit has three main parts, each one leading students, in steps, toward increasingly more nuanced thinking, so that they can eventually do the work independently, not merely follow your thinking. It's easy 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. It is challenging to teach young people to think for themselves and to be dissatisfied themselves with easy, literal, undisputed reading and thinking. They'll need some specific strategy instruction in analytical reading practices or they will remain ever dependent on collaborative, teacher-led, coauthored understandings.

Part One will teach students to analyze moments in their lives and in literature for what we can learn from them—our ability to learn from experience is what makes us human and what, ultimately, helps us rise above current conditions and experiences.



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 the Common Core State Standards analyze nonfiction texts—for more than one idea—is also relevant for fiction. And you'll show them that ideas live in more than one text.

In Part Two, you'll move students to more nuanced reading and thinking, teaching them to lay texts that are united thematically alongside one another and investigate how the respective authors have developed the 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, 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 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. Dr. Martin Luther King's ability to write, "I have a dream," Lincoln's understanding that "fourscore and seven years ago" is more poetic and therefore more memorable than "eighty-seven," Jefferson's articulation of "we hold these truths to be self-evident"—all stem from these thinkers having been steeped in literary language and metaphor. 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*, that the suitcase is more than a suitcase in *Tiger Rising*, or that President Snow is a symbol for historical totalitarian leaders in *The Hunger Games*.

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 especially 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 the texts of which you have multiple copies, ranging back over the fantasy and historic fiction you've 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 they participated in those units of study, and they can reach for harder texts. And some club members may pass books back and forth, talking across them even though no one is reading the same book at the same time.

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 as possible at appropriate levels

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 reading workshop, members of a book club will read books together—say, for example, four students read *Hatchet*. Within a week of the start of this unit, you'll be encouraging readers to think about the one book they are reading—in this instance, *Hatchet*—in relation to 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*? Or *The Maze Runners*? 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 actually read but that are just difficult enough for them to be striving and achieving. 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 for your lower-level readers that are as suggestive and complicated as possible. The Dragon Slayer Academy series, for instance, at levels N/M/O, offers wild complexities and provocative themes, whereas it may be hard to develop thematic understanding in the Magic Treehouse series. 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 (those from previous years, for example, may qualify). 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, you first need to decide the skills that will be brought forward. We recommend using the performance assessment aligned with the curricular calendar to glimpse how well your kids are able to analyze across two texts and articulate their ideas about texts in writing, using 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. You can meanwhile 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: Analyzing Our Lives and Literature

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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 literature are. You'll teach all your students how to return to critical moments in their

lives and learn more from those moments. Because their lives do matter, and they matter most as the set of experiences through which they become principled, reflective, powerful adults. So 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 yourself) 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, more accustomed to speaking in this analytical, idea-based language. You 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. In your first lesson, you may invite readers to reconsider experiences in their lives from a more analytical view than anyone can have while in the middle of those experiences. First, you’ll tell them 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. 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 notebook and analyze them for ideas or life-lessons they see in them. Then they can turn to the stories they’ve read so far this year and share their ideas with a partner or their fellow club members. Coach into how kids support their ideas with evidence, and teach them to listen closely to one another and to add to the ideas that are brought up, so that they build a cornucopia of ideas together. If this teaching seems too much for one lesson, you could break it into two—one in which 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 in which 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 with 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 while 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, since standardized tests word this same question in a variety of ways. Alternately, students could be invited to think about the people in their families who are always drawing life-lessons from things that happen. Perhaps a grandparent returns from a family event saying, “See what I mean? I always tell you—families have to stick together.” That’s interpretation.

If your students have a lot of trouble interpreting, you will want to do a lot more reading aloud, showing them how you begin to think about the story interpretively. We

recommend you watch Kathleen Tolan's work with *The Giving Tree* on the DVD that accompanies *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*, observing her active moves as she demonstrates how she supports kids as they 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 \_\_\_\_\_. [She recalls and 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 say excitedly, "I know! I've got an idea!" Even if their ideas are not particularly strong, accept them anyhow, listen to them, and find better ideas within those flawed ones.

If your students are having trouble interpreting, you can also begin doing this work across the whole day. What lessons can be learned from the stories of the discovery of America or from the Revolutionary War? The ragamuffin Colonists, lying belly-down in the leaves of the woods in the manner learned from American Indians and defeating the rows of uniformed British soldiers marching in unison down the street, can be a lesson in how the little guy can topple the mighty or in the irony of using lessons learned from those we have conquered to conquer others or in how inventiveness can be stronger than mere muscle.

In your second lesson, you'll turn your readers to pivotal moments in stories, showing them how to pay attention to moments when characters experience strong emotions and/or make critical choices. You'll reteach that at each of these moments in a story, readers can make more than one interpretation, 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, thus prompting your students to return to favorite texts as well. There is value in giving students opportunities to reread texts. Here they'll have a chance to revisit favorites, thumbing through the pages for remembered moments, reconsidering them more analytically, jotting down ideas those parts suggest, and then arguing and defending those ideas with their partner and fellow club members. As readers talk to one another, teach them to listen carefully not for whether they agree with an idea but for whether the originator of the idea justifies it well—that is, do your readers assemble textual evidence for their arguments?

In lesson three, you'll probably find it helpful to begin with a chart that students coauthor of the ideas and lessons they've gathered as they've revisited 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 participated in the historical fiction unit of study described in this calendar and in the *Tackling Complex Texts* volume of *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*, then they have bridged themes across texts before. If that's the case, 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, use your chart to visibly articulate

themes that seem to appear in more than one of your read-alouds. For example, the idea that even a child may make a tremendous difference in a community is suggested by *The Hunger Games* books. It is also suggested by *The Other Side* and the Harry Potter series. Demystifying “theme” so that young readers can analyze texts for their thematic implications themselves rather than wait to be handed a sacrosanct, preconceived theme may be the most important 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 after reading this I think \_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_\_.

I learned from [character, 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 it 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 reading new books, so have them choose a book at the end of this session if they haven’t done so already and begin reading it for homework.

While your students have been revisiting familiar texts, they’ll have been thinking about more than one idea in these texts, but they’ll have been doing it *after* they’ve finished the book. In 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 talk about some of the ideas your current read-aloud text is suggesting so far. Have your readers jot these down, substantiate them by giving a little boxes-and-bullets speech to club members, and be ready to gather more evidence for these ideas as you read on. 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, so they will 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 as we keep reading, ideas we had about a text simply are no longer true—the text diverges and the story suggests alternative ideas, so we 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 readers remain alert and responsive, and that we expect to keep validating our ideas and revising them. You might show students that at first *The Hunger Games* (the first volume of the trilogy) seems to be the story of a solitary girl who makes friends with one other solitary boy, perhaps teaching us that like-minded people find one another even in tough situations. But then the story takes a new turn, and Katniss is suddenly thrust into the spotlight, leading one to think that the story may also be about the lengths people will go to to protect the ones they love. 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 \_\_\_\_\_."

To model, you might read aloud the first chapters of *The Hunger Games* and when you get to the part where Katniss makes the choice to save her sister, Prim, from taking part in the games, you might say, "Wow, Katniss really surprised me by standing in for her sister and basically saving her life. Up until this point she wanted nothing to do with this place and these people, and now she is choosing to take part in the games that she hates so much. Maybe this story is beginning to be more about the lengths we go to for other people, how no matter what we believe, when we are challenged we will stand up for our family. But I still can't get over how terrible these games are. What kind of a place is this that would allow something like this to happen and even televise it? I wonder if this book is about that, too. What could it be trying to say about the world? Turn to your partner and try saying, 'It *could* be \_\_\_\_\_ or maybe it *could* be \_\_\_\_\_.'"

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

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You'll probably notice that your readers are eager to show that an idea that is true in one text may be true in another. In fact, you can expect they'll begin to see themes everywhere; they'll lapse into cliché or even into proverbs; 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 a straight face 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 members will eagerly apply that idea to all their texts.

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 on to their dreams. They are similar in how they are lonely. But they are not similar in many other ways. Oliver tackles differences in gender expectations, whereas Clover tackles the color line. Oliver acts alone, whereas Clover enlists others in 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 showed you I was 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, it's 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 they think are related alongside one another and learning how to analyze the nuances in how these stories are different as well as similar. (There are more suggestions in "Coaching into Clubs," below, for supporting clubs as they choose their books, interact with one another, and document their work.) It may be helpful to ask some students to create a chart listing the titles, characters, places, and themes or issues in this year's read-aloud texts and in old favorites your students remember. 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 reading notebook, if your kids are keeping them, reminding yourself of earlier books you've read and of ideas you noticed in those books. And just as you showed your students how

to revisit their writer's notebook to see new ideas in old stories, you can show them how as you revisit and remind yourself of stories you read before, you have new understandings and insight in the light of your new thinking.

In your third lesson, you'll teach your students that just as we can study how the settings of stories that share themes are usually different and the difference has implications for how the theme develops in the story, there are usually also differences in the characters—their backgrounds, their perspectives and points of view, and their traits. If you examine how Oliver Button responds to trouble in *Oliver Button Is a Sissy*, for instance, he is quiet, almost silent about his determination. He openly opposes his father's urge that he play baseball, 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 (one of several, probably) that kids don't always believe the same things their parents do. But the characters show those beliefs somewhat differently. Neither child speaks in defiance, but Clover immediately enlists other children in her cause. 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 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. Paying attention to detail, poring over material, honing ideas with intellectual zeal, are the same kinds of thinking that allow lawyers to prepare defenses and researchers to create new vaccines.

If your students need more support 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. You may, especially if your students are engaged in the parallel writing workshop unit, "Interpretive Essays," want 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. So teach your students 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 character, like our ideas, is 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 this way, you are continuing to teach students the Common Core State Standards work of thinking about the *implications* of what we read. And you are continuing the work of all activists, whose thinking and lives and decisions have been informed by the texts they have read.

Your fifth lesson of this part of the unit is a repertoire lesson. 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. You may teach your students that just as a basketball player who has been practicing dribbling and throwing finds in a game that he or she does those things 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 who has studied the elements of a story individually now takes in all the parts of the story as they come, 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 think and talk about how the story we are reading compares to them, we weigh our own lives and decisions against those the characters make, we have epiphanies about possible life-lessons the story teaches. 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 lesson they demonstrate will shift. Any reader of the Harry Potter books 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: Analyzing Literary Devices and How We Are Affected by Texts

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Students take great joy in being introduced to symbolism and 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. That fence *isn’t* just in Clover’s yard, and it manifests itself differently in different places, times, and situations. Teach your students, therefore, that one way readers are moved by literature is by symbols that seem significant. We can begin to see—and say—that objects have symbolic importance. Usually, students will grasp how symbolism works if you simply give a stream of examples and invite students to add to this stream during your lesson. The fence in *The Other Side* is the barrier in anyone’s life, the dragon in *The Paper Bag Princess* is the fear 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 could symbolize gang acceptance in Eve Bunting’s *Your Move*, the chess game in that same story or the hunting call in *Crow Call*, by Lois Lowry, that could symbolize a choice about harming others or protecting lives. Objects like these are laden with potential meaning.

Your mantra in this unit is to 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 the subtler ones, 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 a symbolic element that is surprisingly new to students—the notion that titles can also be symbolic. You’ll teach your readers that often a moment comes in our reading when we realize that the title may have significance. Sometimes at the end of the story, sometimes earlier, we’ll come upon a line or a scene that seems to refer directly back to the title. Invite your readers to consider what “the other side” and “fly away home” and “the hunger games” mean in the context of the story. Your book clubs will be zealots, usually, 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 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, we teach students this age that powerful readers know that in good stories, detail matters, and we question details that seem to be without context. For example, if you are wondering why a cat is in a certain scene, it’s probably there as foreshadowing—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). 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, and they are alert to twists. Small scenes along the way alert 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.

When we return to the beginning of *The Hunger Games*, we find many, many clues about Katniss’ character, troubles, and potential that didn’t really make that much sense when we read the chapter the first time; only later do we recall or revisit them. *Edward’s Eyes* also beautifully demonstrates the significance of foreshadowing. Even before you begin the story, you’re pretty sure there’s something special about Edward. And you’re pretty sure he’s dead. Understanding foreshadowing helps readers navigate more complex texts in two ways. One, it teaches a discipline of rapid, on-the-run rereading. Anyone who has tackled a complicated text knows that we often recall something that seems connected, that was perhaps foreshadowed earlier and that we

now recognize as being significant, so we quickly turn back. Two, we are alert to details that might otherwise seem random. If the author inserts a detail that seems unexplained, chances are we'll find that it matters later, both to what happens in the story and to what the story may mean or be about.

Repetition is another literary device worth teaching, not just in poetry, but in reading and analyzing literature. Teach your readers 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 slightly different. You might return to familiar read-alouds and show your readers that sometimes a bell goes off in our 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 he wears—blue shirts, blue jeans—and the blue bag he carries. The repetition of so many blue things alerts us that the color blue may matter—that the character's *mood* is blue (and perhaps ultimately shows us that we may feel blue, but we can still hold onto hope).

Finally, since you've undoubtedly already taught your students to analyze characters' perspectives and points of view, this may be an apt time to return to that teaching and show them how to analyze and compare the significance of a character's perspective 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, depending on our circumstances. If analyzing characters' perspectives and points of view is new to your students, you'll want to teach them how to articulate characters' perspectives by putting aside their own and trying to say what it must be like for the character in the story, even speaking in that character's voice about their emotions and point of view.

## Coaching into Clubs: Supporting Students and Pushing Them Farther

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Some of your clubs may need some coaching in choosing books. When they finish a book in which they have talked long about the theme of how kids sometimes crack under family pressures, they may look for another book that has this theme listed on the back cover! You'll want to remind them that good books are about many ideas, to trust that pretty much any good book is going to be full of ideas, so when they begin a second book some of those ideas will be related to those in their first book. If you know there are one or two books that will undoubtedly contain some of the same ideas, of course, you could steer some of your club members in that direction—especially a club of 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. 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 easily see that books are related by theme but don't seem to expect that the books will also have many differences, differences that 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.

In order to scaffold club conversations, you might prepare a large index card that says *talk like essayists* on one side and on the other lists a series of prompts for doing so, perhaps:

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 \_\_\_\_.

Readers might begin their conversation by sharing lots of ideas. Once they reach a place where they think, "Oh! That's it, we need to talk long about this one," they can flip over the card to the series of prompts that support talking like essayists.

A big question for readers to ask in club conversations is, "How do these two or three books advance the same theme differently?" These conversations will help readers when they are rehearsing and fast-drafting 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. This is true even in picture books, so you might use them to give your students quick, accessible practice. For example, 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 what they want. 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), so instead he 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 us. 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 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 fast-drafting essays will help your students become adept at this kind of thinking, reading, and writing work.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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This unit is a good match for your students if they have learned to read between the lines and infer things 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 the unit of study on character and series novels (Unit Two) and perhaps the book club unit on historical fiction (Unit Five). In those units, you'll find additional teaching points to support inferring things about characters and navigating complex fiction. You'll assess your students' readiness for this unit of study by inviting them to demonstrate a rich partner discussion about their books—and then listening for how they talk about storylines and characters' changes. 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. They shouldn't need you to be constantly checking on how their reading is going—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, 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 junkies” who speed through books, fine. If you have readers who need to keep reading at a steady pace, with lots of time spent with their eyes on print, have them keep an eyes-on-reading log and allow time for kids to look over their logs with their club members and 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 substantiate, defend, and track those ideas. They love to call out a theme but need support 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 worth lingering over, and you'll want to look at your students' reading notebook 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.

## **Part One: Analyzing Our Lives and Literature**

- "When we're thinking about possible lessons stories teach, readers know that events in our lives are open to analysis, just as events in literature are. Often we are inspired to think about lessons in our lives by how we think about stories, and vice versa—we can learn lessons from characters and moments in stories, not just from the people and moments in our lives. 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."
- "Often there are pivotal moments in stories that may suggest ideas to the reader. As we read, therefore, we may keep asking ourselves, 'What is this story starting to be about?' One kind of moment to be alert to as a reader is a moment when a character makes a critical choice. At a moment like this we as readers may learn significant lessons about the traits of the main character and how those traits compare with our own. In complicated storylines, those traits may change."
- "Readers remember that there are many interpretations of any single event in a story. Just as characters in the story have different perspectives on any event, readers will bring different perspectives. One way to open up to more ideas is to consider the various perspectives of characters and readers and the points of view they may bring to what an event means."
- "As readers keep asking ourselves, 'What is this story starting to be about?' we also remain open to revising 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."
- "Just as stories are about more than one idea, ideas live in more than one story and across literature and nonfiction. 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 or themes."

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

- “In texts that suggest similar themes, readers often analyze differences in the texts and how those differences affect possible meanings. One difference we may focus on is the difference in setting—in the time and place stories occur—and how it affects the way a theme or idea develops.”
- “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 quickly recall texts so that we can move on to analyzing them. Often when we compare a text we’ve read before with one we are reading now, we return to the previous text itself, revisiting parts that seem important.”
- “Just as we may analyze the differences in the settings of stories that are linked by theme, knowledgeable readers often analyze the differences in characters as well. We may pay attention to their backgrounds, pressures, perspectives, how they respond to trouble, and how those characteristics affect the way the text suggests particular aspects of an idea or theme.”
- “As we begin to think and talk about the ways in which characters respond to trouble in thematically linked texts, we may compare those choices to ones we make ourselves in our own lives, with the goal of thinking how character traits are always revisable, whether they exist in the pages of a book or article or are our own traits.”
- “Just as an athlete accesses all his or her skills from the moment a competition begins, so readers access all our reading practices from the moment we start reading. We try to process what is happening in the story, at the same time asking ourselves, ‘What is this story starting to be about?’ And then we keep adding new information and having new insights as we read.”

## Part Three: Analyzing Literary Devices and How We Are Affected by Texts

- “One way readers are moved by literature is by symbols that seem significant. Often we may pay attention to objects that are repeated in the text, and those objects may be laden with potential meaning.”
- “Another part of the text that is often symbolic is the title. Readers often think and talk about the potential meaning of the title, both part way through our reading and when we finish a text.”

- “Readers are often alert to foreshadowing, or what is known as ‘Chekov’s gun.’ We know that in good stories, details matter, and we are alert to the potential meanings that reside in otherwise perplexing or unexplained details. Often when later moments remind us of something that occurred earlier, we find ourselves rapidly rereading earlier parts of the text.”
- “Readers are also alert to repetition—to lines or scenes that feel parallel. Usually there will be significance in those repeated moments, and readers think about their potential meaning.”
- “We may consider, as well, the various perspectives and points of view that are represented in the text in any given moment and across the text and how they affect that meanings that are conveyed. We may compare the points of view of various characters with our own and consider as well whose points of view are invisible or partial and how that affects the text’s meaning.”
- “Readers may consider the literary tradition, especially the archetypes and narrative arcs that usually inform this tradition, and then consider how a text follows or transgresses this tradition and how that relates to the meaning of the text.”



## UNIT SEVEN

# Test Preparation

MARCH/APRIL

### Overview

This unit is based on the most up-to-date information we have on the 2011 NYS ELA tests and on the New York State Learning Standards. 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 fact, 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. 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 they have been taught throughout the year. Perhaps most important of all, this unit supports students' ability to think logically and flexibly and transfer all they know to their test-taking.

For 2011, students will most likely be asked to read for longer periods of time than ever before on the test. Our research tells us they will likely be asked to read for blocks of sixty (grades 3 and 5), seventy (grade 4), or eighty (grades 6–8) minutes and may encounter a greater variety of texts and most likely a greater amount and variety of non-fiction. We cannot expect students to maintain focus and use a repertoire of strategies across many texts for sixty minutes or longer if they have never had the opportunity to do this work. In addition to being asked to read for longer amounts of time, students

will most likely be asked to read longer texts. It is likely texts will average about two pages for grades 3–5 and two or three pages for grades 6–8. Students will be asked to accumulate and synthesize information and ideas across these 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 fifty-word worksheet for half an hour reading 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? 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.

## Getting Ready

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Think carefully about how you will spend your time as well as how you will structure your days so you support independent reading and writing about reading. 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 testlike 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 the time spent reading independently you could continue your small-group test-related work with students. While students practice during test-prep workshop, you will circulate, coach students, and support them. 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 hours. Other schools have independent reading during a separate, protected block and use what used to be reading workshop time for test prep. Yet other schools substitute test prep or independent reading for some of their social studies work for two or three weeks.

Because of the possible emphasis on nonfiction texts, we recommend that your students read nonfiction texts for at least thirty-minute blocks during science and social studies classes. Aim to provide students with a variety of texts similar in length and for-



mat to the ones they'll be reading on the test—informational passages that are two or three pages long 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 how-to pieces. Give students opportunities to teach one another what they are reading, and continue to emphasize boxes-and-bullets and other finding-the-main-idea strategies.

### *Assembling Materials*

Assemble test-prep material by collecting actual tests from the last few years. Use texts from earlier grades as well as your own grade, and put the passages in order of difficulty. As a sixth-grade teacher, then, you might have on the top of the pile a realistic fiction story from fourth grade, then another more difficult fourth-grade passage, then another, then the easiest passage from fifth grade, then another from fifth grade, then another, finally including passages from sixth-grade tests. 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. (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 or three pages in length.

As you design these packets, we suggest you sort materials by genre, and then by difficulty. Create some packets with lower-level texts, some with medium-level texts, 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 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. Here's our assessment of possible texts for the NYS ELA. If you work in a New York State School, we recommend you visit the NYS ELA website: [www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/ela/](http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/ela/). See our website, <http://tc.readingandwritingproject.com>, for various passage levels from previous years' tests.

## **Likely Genres for the 2011 NYS ELA**

### *Narrative (Story) Structure*

Realistic fiction (grades 3–8)

Historical fiction (grades 4–8)

Science fiction (grades 5–8)

Folktales (grades 3–8)

Book excerpts/literary works (grades 4–8)

Classical works (grades 7–8)

Plays (grades 5–8)

Narrative nonfiction (including biography and autobiography) (grades 3–8)

### *Expository Structure (Nonfiction)*

Reports (grades 4–8)

Information pieces (grades 3–8)

How-to pieces (grades 3–4)

Interviews (grades 3–5)

Questions and answers (grades 3–8)

Letters (grades 3–8)

### *Poetry*

Narrative poems (grades 3–4)

Informational poems (grades 5–8)

Because of the changes to the test this year, it is recommended 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 testlike questions to go with it. Good sources for these texts are *Highlights*, *Cricket*, *Cobblestone*, *Read and Rise*, *Story-Works*, and *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. You might put these questions in the same order for each text: the first question, a main-idea question; the second, a vocabulary-in-context question; the third, about mood/emotion/tone; the fourth, a genre question; and so on. Then make the same kinds of questions for different levels of texts. 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 only answer them successfully until the text is over his reading level. In that case, you'll know that he doesn't need main-idea help in texts over that level but rather some strategies for reading too-hard texts, such as skimming, summarizing, underlining, jotting, and using pictures and headings. Teach them to him as you continue to sharpen his main-idea strategies, such as reading only the first and last sentence 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.

## *Getting Started with Accessible Texts*

There are two main approaches to getting students ready for their daily test-prep learning and practice. First, students must be alert as they read. They should have expectations for how a text will go based on their understanding of a particular genre. As they read fictional stories, students should think about what challenges the main character faces and how he or she resolves them. Teach students to be alert for some of the predictable questions, 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 smarter reading and won't be seduced by the distracters among the answers. In fact, the first few times students practice, you might 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 distracters); 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, and 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 their performance because you'll know that they're struggling with the language of the questions. 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, including 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 whether 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 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 after regular school hours. Another option is not to isolate test prep and schedule heavy partner work on days two and three, less partner work on day four, and have 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 1</b>	<b>Day 2</b>	<b>Day 3</b>	<b>Day 4</b>	<b>Day 5</b>
<p>Shared Experience</p> <p>Together the class works on reading one text and answering the questions.</p> <p>You lead the class by providing students with prompts and strategies that will help them navigate and hold on to 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>You will confer with partners as they discuss the choices they made.</p>	<p>Independent</p> <p>After a minilesson is given, students read alone (reading the same passage 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 test. They should annotate and underline important places where they learn something about the character, jot in the margins problems characters face, note instances when characters change, and identify the big ideas of article sections. 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 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. Students will not have time to do this on the day of the test. Another strategy that may help students hold on to what they are reading is to read the passage in three or four large chunks of meaning (beginning, middle, end) and to say what they read in a clear, simple sentence. This will act as a road map just in case students need to go back to the text when answering the questions. Before they go back, they need to think to themselves, "Where in the text will I find this information?"

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.

## Moving through the Unit

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The big work of this unit is not to teach new reading strategies for each genre but to support students in bringing forward all they have learned all year about each genre. That is, this unit is not about teaching students that realistic fiction pieces have a problem and a solution and that the character often changes—it's 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 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, review strategies students already know for each genre, teach strategies to quickly identify genres, and teach predictable questions for each genre. 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 at least two or three days), you will provide opportunities for students to practice the 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.

Teach your students they can use the same strategies for each genre: mark the text, predict, write the answer, and then match it to the choices. Gradually, they will be able just to 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 those on a standardized test. Teach students to preview the text to ascertain its subject and structure, make a quick reading plan, and break the text into manageable chunks. Then, as 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 tests, nor can they reject texts because they are boring or irrelevant. 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, resilient readers.

### *Narrative*

If it's a *narrative* text, readers expect to pay attention to and infer things about characters. Students need to be alert for what kind of people the 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—research 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 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.



## Predictable Questions on Narrative Passages

What is the main problem or struggle in the story?

Which trait(s) 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?

### *Non-narrative*

If it's a *non-narrative* or *expository* text (including information texts, advertisements, and interviews), readers may expect to pay attention to and infer things from the structure, headings, and topic sentences. Students will need to be 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 how the object or procedure is used or works or what it shows. There may be questions about what items are needed in a step and 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 overall 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. 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?

Which lines contain alliteration?

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

What is the author telling you about [name of character]?

What did [name of character] decide to do?

Which element of poetry is not found in these stanzas?

- What feeling is the speaker expressing in the poem?
- What does [example of figurative language] mean?
- What is the rhyme scheme in the first stanza of this poem?
- What is the the tone of the poem?
- What does \_\_\_\_ symbolize?
- As what does the narrator see the main character?
- How does the poet feel about \_\_\_\_?
- Who is talking in the poem?

## Reading a Variety of Texts

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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 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 make sense of what they are reading rather than getting hung up on holding on to predictable questions.

### Some Additional Strategies for Reading Passages

- Test-takers should think about the structure or genre of the passage early on. They should read for important ideas in each part. They don't need to hold on to every detail. If they need to find a specific detail from the passage, they can do so when they get to that question. Holding on to the structure/genre will help them locate details faster.
- Test-takers should take the time to think about the main idea after reading the passage. The main idea should be connected to all parts of the passage, not just one. If test-takers identify the main idea correctly before going to the questions, there is a strong likelihood they will answer at least two questions right.
- Tips for identifying author's purpose when the passage is nonfiction:
  - ▶ Think about the main idea.
  - ▶ Think about what the author wants the reader to know about the main idea. For example, if the main idea is *sharks*, does the author want the reader to know that sharks are dangerous? Or that sharks are beautiful, fascinating creatures?

- ▶ Think about why the author might have written the passage. Possible reasons might be to:
  - *Teach something.*
  - *Share an opinion.*
  - *Get people to take action.*
- Tips for identifying the author’s purpose when the passage is fiction:
  - ▶ Think about the main problem in the story.
  - ▶ Think about how problem is handled and what lessons the character(s) may have learned.
  - ▶ Think about what lessons the reader can learn from the story.

## Reading Actively by Creating a Road Map

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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. 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 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 this 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. 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 margin 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.

### Sample Nonfiction Passage Road Map

Main Idea:

Gist/main idea of paragraph 1:

Gist/main idea of paragraph 2:

Gist/main idea of paragraph 3:

Author’s purpose:

## Sample Fiction Passage Road Map

Main problem:

Gist/how the problem grows in scene 1:

Gist/how the problem grows in scene 2:

Gist/how the problem grows in scene 3:

How the problem is resolved/main lesson learned:

Partners can practice creating road maps, reading a passage together, stopping to talk about each section, and thinking together, “What is this section mainly about? What note can we jot to remind ourselves what this section was about?”

Road mapping is an effective strategy when students are reading difficult passages. 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 take too long creating road maps to annotate the text with symbols so 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.

## Introducing Students to Types of Questions

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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 understand what the question is asking them to do. Don’t let students waste valuable time figuring out question types.

### *Multiple-Choice Questions*

There are two ways we suggest teaching multiple-choice questions: one is attached to genre work and the other is a separate study on question types. It is certainly valuable to teach predictable questions according to genre and to teach students to read passages with those questions in mind. It is also valuable to teach them common question types that appear on the test and give them strategies for how to best approach those question types regardless of the genre. Note that neither strategy may 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 type from another. To do this, help them understand the different ways 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 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 not to ask, "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* of the choices 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?
- What is the story *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?

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?"; then 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; 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 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.

Some detail questions are essentially sequencing questions. While it is not important that students learn all the 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 \_\_\_\_?
- 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 the line \_\_\_\_ mean?
- Which event happens *first* in the story?

It is important that students learn to read detail questions very carefully. Many wrong-answer choices include 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, as 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 envisioning, developing theories, and synthesizing to draw conclusions about texts. There are subtypes of inference questions, such as cause and effect, theme, and author’s purpose. It may not be necessary to teach students these different subtypes. 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 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?
- What does the word *degree* in sentence two most likely mean?
- 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 which of the following?
- Why did the author most likely write this passage?

Inference questions can be difficult. It is important that strugglers learn to identify genres in order to think about questions that will mostly likely be asked as they read. For example, test-takers are often asked about the lesson that can be learned from a fictional 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.

## Familiarizing Students with Wrong Answers

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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 an answer choice that relates to the reader's outside knowledge—it may sound correct but not be within the scope of the passage. 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.
- Choices that raise a topic that's related to the passage but that's not really covered in the passage or is outside the scope of what is covered.

## Teaching Students to Deal with Difficulty

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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 successive portions of the text reveal it to be 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 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 from 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, move past hard words unless there are questions that refer to those words, and 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 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 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 test. The vocabulary work you do just prior to the test, then, will be based on synonyms and contextual clues. Because this work will occur on the brink of the test, now is probably not the best time to teach readers to persevere with 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 keep 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 \_\_\_\_ mean?" Students can often figure out the answer 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 their time by figuring out how many questions there are and how many minutes they have. Teach them elimination strategies. For example, you might want to teach them to eliminate the answers that are found in the passage but do not answer the question. Or when they think of the correct answer before they look at the answer choices, they can eliminate the ones that aren't close to their own (only after they have read through all of them, of course). 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

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Each and every day of this unit, during independent reading—not during the test-prep workshop—you'll want to confer with and coach small groups of 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 in order 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 whether he or she answered other

main-idea questions incorrectly before putting that student in a small group focusing on main idea. 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 passage level, 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 in connection with the short responses.

## Reading Aloud

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Your read-alouds will support students' multiple-choice work as well as their listening skills, which are often also evaluated on state tests. 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. Read-alouds in this unit 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. Start with narratives, including realistic and historical fiction, plays, book excerpts, science fiction (grades 5–8), allegorical folktales, and biographies. Help students listen as stories unfold swiftly, with their minds alert, ready to answer predictable questions. Start with high-interest short texts and move only at the end to texts from the last few years' tests.

Listening Selections		
<p><b>Grade 3</b></p> <p>Narrative Text</p> <p>5 multiple choice</p> <p>3 short responses</p>	<p><b>Grade 4</b></p> <p>Narrative Text</p> <p>5 multiple choice</p> <p>3 short responses</p>	<p><b>Grade 5</b></p> <p>Informational Text</p> <p>5 multiple choice</p> <p>3 short responses</p>

<b>Grade 6</b>	<b>Grade 7</b>	<b>Grade 8</b>
Narrative Text	Informational Text	Informational Text
5 multiple choice	5 multiple choice	5 multiple choice
3 short responses	3 short responses	3 short responses

Teach students to get ready to listen to fiction and fable read-alouds 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, have them stop and jot their responses and eventually jot responses to testlike short-answer questions. This way, the read-aloud explicitly teaches students to listen with their minds turned on, hold a story in their heads, and expect predictable questions.

When you begin reading short passages aloud, 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, “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 that Trudy is \_\_\_\_.” Or, “What’s that part mostly about?” Or, “If the story had continued, what would most likely have happened next?”

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-alouds to include narrative nonfiction, since sixth



graders will encounter more of this structure. Common passages on the test include material about sports, historical, and scientific figures—and fiction and narrative non-fiction in which the character is an animal.

Reading poetry aloud supports students’ work on listening to and silently reading texts on 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 their effect.

## Reminding Students to Be Aware of Time Limits

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Because students are tested under timed conditions, how to use the allotted time wisely eventually needs to be part of their preparation. Many students need coaching on both finishing within the time limit and not rushing through, finishing well before the time is over but not checking their work carefully. However, the first priority is that students get plenty of practice becoming more comfortable with test-taking strategies, such as note-taking while reading; therefore, 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 by grade level for the reading comprehension section of the NYS ELA:

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Number of Passages</b>	<b>Number of Questions</b>	<b>Minutes</b>
3	6–7	35	60
4	7–8	43	70
5	6–7	35	60
6	6–7	41	80
7	6–7	41	80
8	6–7	41	80

Sixth graders have 80 minutes to read six or seven passages and answer about 40 questions. This averages to eleven or twelve minutes per passage. Of course, depending on their length, some passages will take longer than others, with the longest passages taking around fifteen minutes. You can give students a baseline timing assessment by giving them two passages (typically one fiction and one nonfiction), each two or three pages long, along with accompanying questions. Ask students to read both passages and answer the questions, using all of the strategies that they know, including marking up the passage. Record how long each student takes to read each passage and answer the related questions, noting students who take much longer or much shorter than eighteen minutes or so.

If you have students who take much longer than eighteen minutes, work with them on the reading strategies they are using. They might be spending too much time marking up the passage before they go on to the questions. Or they might be taking too much time rereading the passage to find answers. Work with them on streamlining their active reading so that they are only jotting the basic gist for each section, not underlining and highlighting too much. Also work with them on answering predictable questions for each genre, as well as strategies for identifying and dealing with each question type so 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 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, since their recall will be much sharper right after reading a passage.

## Working with Struggling Test-Takers

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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 about the whole of the text, and there are questions that ask them to think about a part, a line, or a detail. You might want to create a series of questions on sentence strips. Then have students take turns reading the questions and putting them either in an envelope marked *W* (think of the whole of the text) or an envelope marked *D* (think of a detail from the text).

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

You can also create the game Which Sentence Doesn't Belong? Students read through four or five test questions and 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 what?
- Why did the author most likely write this passage?

It is also 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, 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 that, while not incorrect, 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 that only one answer is the best answer.

Among the first things you'll want to make sure students know is that boldface 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. Students have to match cards containing test language terms with cards describing the strategy that will help them answer the question. The test language and strategy cards might look like the ones below (the cards you use should reflect the words you've been using to talk about test-taking strategies):

**Right Before**

Recall or look back in the text for what came directly in front of that sentence, part, or step.

Mostly About

Think about the whole text.

Best Describes

Words that tell you what kind of person someone is based on that person's actions

NOT

Refers to a statement that is not true about the text.

Main Problem

Describes the biggest issue or challenge the character is facing

Most Like

Identify the genre of the passage you read.

<p style="text-align: center;">Most Likely</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Based on what you read, what is the best explanation or meaning?</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Right After</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Recall or look back in the text for what came next.</p>

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. For example, you might make collages of pictures from magazines that can be sorted several 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 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 tests, 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 comprehension 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 this outside the context 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 PE 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 PE." 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*, *New York*, and put opinion and fact statements in an envelope. 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 might read a sentence that states, “*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 into a group and invite them to discuss why. 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 or C into a group and have a debate: “Remember, what is the *best* answer?” Main-idea and true-or-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 listen for what they say about 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.



## Decoding

Many of our struggling and emergent readers have difficulties decoding and comprehending test passages above their independent reading level. 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 graphophonic 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 while maintaining a standard pace 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 in order 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 you can't teach *all* the words 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 you and your 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, 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 gra-

dated meanings of these words. You'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 a 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 a read-aloud—they may talk about how the character is feeling, using words from the word wall. When you do this, you'll find it prompts students to explore more categories of words, as they seek words that mean *proud* or *shy*, for example.

Students can also use these words on the Post-its they use to jot down things about their independent reading books. If they have a series of 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 notebook, as they learn to write literary essays or practice writing 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 to help your students extend their vocabulary. Who said test prep had to be boring?



## UNIT EIGHT

# Social Issues Book Clubs

MAY

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### Overview

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This unit of study has become a great favorite with teachers and with middle school students. It serves a few important purposes and is highly relevant to students' lives. For one thing, the unit encourages readers to shift from reading for plot toward reading for ideas. Social issues book clubs nudge readers to read and revisit books, thinking about the ways in which the books address themes and ideas. Then, too, these book clubs ask readers to think about ways books are similar and different, one book to/from the next. This unit not only teaches students to think between and among texts they read, it also invites students to think between the text and their lives; social issues book clubs encourage children to see that reading can help us deal with the issues of our lives. All of this work actively supports intertextuality, an important skill in the new Common Core State Standards.

Social issues book clubs are important for a few other reasons. This unit offers you, the teacher, the opportunity to use the books you have on hand with great flexibility. Some clubs may read across multiple young adult fiction books, but they (and you) aren't tied to one genre. This year you may expand your students' reading territory and create text sets that combine poems and articles with novels that share similar themes. Adding nonfiction teaches readers to expand their understanding beyond the borders of their novel, and gives students an opportunity and the tools to examine the social issues embedded in their content-area work.

As you prepare, you will undoubtedly find it helpful to turn to the unit on book clubs in Lucy Calkins' *The Art of Teaching Reading* and to Randy and Katherine Bomer's *For a Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action*. You might also want to read

Stephanie Jones' *Girls, Social Class and Literacy* and Alfred Tatum's *Reading for Their Life*. As you sit down to plan this unit, you may wonder about the term *social issue*. What is a *social issue*, exactly? At a simplistic level, the term refers to issues that affect groups of people, not just the one character. A character may worry that she needs to wear her big sister's hand-me-down clothes. That is a personal struggle. But we can also think about her unique problem as a problem that applies to lots of people—that is, as a social issue. Lots of people worry about fitting in and about peer pressure, so those are social issues. Poverty is a social issue, and the fear that one's family is falling apart can be one too. Homelessness, joblessness, bullying, racism, and bias against old people are also examples of social issues. It is helpful for kids to see that by reading, we can watch characters dealing with social issues and learn to deal with these and other issues. This unit can make each child feel less alone. It can also give kids reasons to read (Alfred Tatum says that particularly for disenfranchised or reluctant readers to keep reading, the curriculum has to answer the question "How can I live my life every day?"). This work helps children bring more to their books, thereby receiving more in return. You may decide that you want to expand the notion of social issues and look at social norms and discourse—the way in which our everyday understanding of rules and regulations relative to gender, for instance, are structured by language, by institutions, and by texts.

This unit is unabashedly aimed at teaching toward social justice. Get ready for it by wearing your own passions on your sleeve. All of us know that sometimes when we read a wonderful book, we find ourselves welling up with a passionate commitment to our beliefs. Stories remind us that we care very much about justice and injustice and about living lives of meaning and significance. You will be teaching children to take their books and their lives seriously. As you prepare, you'll need to think about what books have affected *you*—the choices you make, what kind of person you try to be, the issues you care about—so that you can talk about these books and your life with your students. Having students examine the dynamics of the world around them is one of the many focal points of the Common Core State Standards. Students in middle school are expected to be able to analyze, evaluate, and differentiate sources to help them understand what is going on in the world. When reading, students need to be able to gain knowledge from challenging texts that often make extensive use of elaborate diagrams and data to convey information and illustrate concepts. In short, students need to gain insight from texts that will help them understand complex situations in the world.

## Organizing Your Library

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You'll want to decide whether you want students to read only chapter books in this unit or whether you will give them the opportunity to create text sets, collections of different genres: nonfiction articles, a picture book, short stories, perhaps film clips or videos, and a poem or two. Almost all of our students are adept with technology—they can

upload film clips on their iPhones faster than we can pull a book from the shelves. You'll need to decide how important it is to you that club members are reading the same books. It's conceivable, though not ideal, that students will read different texts but with a shared lens. A helpful way to decide is to think about or imagine your own book club. What does it feel like to read and discuss a common text? Several common texts? Different texts but with a focus? Balance your decision with the materials you have access to and the readers in your room.

One choice you need to make when planning this unit is whether or not your students have strong experience reading books through a lens. You will want to assess the time your readers have spent in book clubs in elementary school, and you will most likely know by this time in the year how adept your sixth graders are at having a theory about a character and tracking that theory throughout a text.

If your readers do not have a particularly strong ability to generate ideas about their books and follow those ideas, revising and confirming them as they read, then you will want to do some of the work of this unit for them by collecting sets of books based on the issues the books deal with. It's easiest for readers to look for examples of how a character faces an issue when they already know the issue exists. For example, you might be tempted to give them a basket labeled *bullying*. However, this limits the conversations they'll have. They'll be hunting and pecking for evidence of bullying instead of using their understanding of a character's issue to enhance their comprehension and interpretation. They won't be learning *how* to identify issues; instead, they'll just be noticing the ones you've already told them are there. It is more beneficial (and harder) for them to locate an issue and examples in a book (as in, reading a book and identifying the issues that arise), and it is most complex to locate several issues in a book or across books. Therefore, you'll want each set of books to deal with more than one issue—you would not want to label a basket *bullying*, but instead name a few issues the book deals with; after all, books rarely only focus on one issue! One way to address this is to put Post-it notes on some of the books for this unit that identify three issues/demographic groups represented in that book, thereby giving students a leg up on the work of the unit. And doing this by book rather than by basket allows some students to find the issues in the books on their own, which is the heart of this unit.

For most of your students, though, we hope that you will instead group books across broad categories of social issues. This allows your students, as they read critically, to discover the issues that are important to them as thinkers and members of society.

We suggest you deliberately make your collections very small—no more than three books and some additional short texts—so there's room for students to add to the collections. Allowing them to classify the books they know best lets them see how books can deal with many issues. You will probably want to have one basket (and one issue) for the whole class to study together through read-alouds and minilessons. You may choose to convene the class around the same issue that a group of struggling readers will explore, thus providing support and lots of dignity for these emerging readers.

## Getting Started: Thinking and Reading Critically

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You may begin the unit by showing students that issues hide within the pages of books they know well. To do so, return to favorite read-aloud books and look for social issues addressed in them. This can lead to the creation of a chart full of social issues. Many times students will look up at this chart and say, “Wait a minute, gender stereotypes is an issue in this book too! Let me show you.” They’ll also see that the issues in books thread through their own writing. This teaches students to empathize with characters who might seem different at first.

At the start, you may choose to focus this work on characters in stories—the struggles the characters face, how those struggles may be named as social issues, and how the characters deal with these struggles. This helps students move away from sequential retelling and helps them develop one lens for determining importance in a story. Thus, you could teach your newly minted middle schoolers that when we read with a lens, first we read for the story, for what happens, and then we read asking, “What does this story teach us about \_\_\_\_ [homelessness, bullying, losing someone, and so on]?” Students might ask such questions as: “Which issues seem important in this story? What are the characters’ reactions to these issues? How do the characters deal with these issues? What perspective does each character have on this issue? If the perspective is different, what explains the difference?” Teach your students to get ready to talk to their book clubs by putting Post-its on moments when they see their characters first facing the issue, then struggling with the issue, then overcoming or not overcoming the issue. This integration, interpretation, and critique are cornerstones of the Common Core State Standards as well as the National Assessment of Education Progress.

Students who are reading *Tears of a Tiger*, for instance, might read it simply as a story about the death of a friend or about guilt. If they read or reread it through the lens of “trying to live up to people’s expectations of men,” then they notice a lot of moments they may have missed the first time. None of these events may be significant to the main action of the story, and so our readers may skip over them. But in order to read more complicated texts, they need to become the kind of readers who pay attention, who can notice and accumulate more complicated character development. In *Tears of a Tiger*, the big problem may get solved. The longer-term, more subtle problems the characters face may not—which is common in more complicated, higher-level books. Reading through this lens will be an introduction to realizing that books can be about more than one thing at a time and readers can read for more than plot. It’s not important that readers notice any single event so much as that we realize that paying close attention to the details in a story, and talking about those details with others, can lead us to a richer understanding.

## Reading through a Lens and Talking Back to the Text

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Your job is not only to teach students to locate issues in their books but also to use this lens as a way to extend their reading and conversation. One way to do this, once you have determined the issues the text is addressing, is to find scenes in which these issues



are glaring. These scenes might be hiding in parts of the text that bother us, that we feel are unfair, or that seem implausible. These “critical scenes” can then be closely read by a book club to try and mine the scene for what the character or characters are going through, how they are reacting, and what we might learn about the issue/demographic group the scene seems to be about.

One way to scaffold students who are ready to tackle more abstract, worldly issues such as gender, class, and race to think critically about these issues is to ask them to think, write, and talk about gender or race or class before you read a story that has one of these issues at its core. For example, you may get students to write or talk about what they think it means to be a boy. How are boys perceived? What pressures do boys have? How do boys think or behave? Then you may read *Your Move*, by Eve Bunting. When reading aloud you’ll want to prompt the students to move between their ideas and the ideas in the story. This will help them spend time thinking about who they are, what they believe, and what they care deeply about so they read through these lenses. You might also push your students to dig deeper into the issue by asking, “Does the way this story talks about gender ring true for me?” As they answer this question, they will want to examine why the text reflects or does not reflect their experiences. They can question what values the text espouses. This can allow students to move between reading and thinking about the sort of world they want to live in. In Norman Webb’s “depths of knowledge” approach, this work is monumentally important in middle school. Looking at a text through a critical lens allows students to develop a deeper understanding of how texts interact with one another and with the world.

One thing to avoid is the idea that any given book is “about” any one thing. In addition, to say that we can read texts only for issues that create dangerous or dramatic situations like abuse or sexism or homelessness also limits the kinds of interpretations our readers can make and connect to. You will want to avoid teaching that talking about gender or race or class automatically means there is an oppressor and a victim. There is value in interpreting and inferring things from these identities without necessarily always trying to find the “problem” or “issue.”

As students write about their lives and the lives of the characters in their stories, and as they become adept at noticing social issues, they’ll often become particularly interested in certain issues. You may find that they can read while searching for places in the text that fit with bullying or homelessness but struggle when asked to read with the lenses of power, gender, class, values, invisibility, democracy, and so on. If so, you can help them understand what these mean by having them write or talk about the issues as they relate to their own lives. It is probably best if you demonstrate that each of us is a member of many groups—groups determined in part by our gender, race, religion, class, and so on but also by our hobbies and our professions. We can talk about how a group identity shapes us. How does your position as, say, a Latina woman or a middle school teacher affect your response to today’s headlines in the newspaper? Ask students to think about what groups they belong to and how those groups shape who they are and how they think.

As clubs read stories through these lenses, it will be important to talk back to the text. Members might ask one another: “Are we okay with how this group is being rep-

resented? Does this fit with what we have seen in the world? Is there something the author seems to want us to know about being a member of that group? Does this fit with our lives? What kind of community is this? What causes people to act this way? What would happen if the character's group was 'flipped'—if a girl character was a boy or a poor character rich? Would that change their choices or reactions? What does this say about what we believe?"

## Critical Reading Clubs: An Option for Your Stronger Readers

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If you teach a class of strong readers, you might consider directing them toward critical reading clubs, in which readers look past small moments of one character experiencing divorce or bullying to ask if there are larger historical and political forces of power represented in the conflict. While situations like divorce and having an absent parent are terrible, even tragic emotional and social problems for students, they are not always related to larger systems of oppression by one politically powerful group over another. It is often the case in the rhetoric of "picking oneself up by the bootstraps" that individuals in dire circumstances are blamed for making it or not making it. But the truth is that in this country, individuals who are of color, who are female, who love someone of the same sex, who speak Spanish as a first language, or who were born in poverty have much less chance of pulling out of those circumstances than someone who was born into white, heterosexual, middle- or upper-class privilege. For some of us, this is a difficult reality to admit; yet, as writer James Baldwin reasons, "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed unless it is faced." Educators who teach critical literacy want their students to recognize when systematic oppression is happening in order to name it and speak back to it.

This unit suggests that students can learn how to read critically by recognizing social injustice in books that truly highlight issues related to it. For example, in a novel like *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, by Christopher Paul Curtis, the main characters' lives intersect in frighteningly close ways with the tragic story of the bombing of the church in Birmingham in 1963 and the death of four little African American girls. With practice and repetition, however, we can apply the critical lens of fairness and justice to any and all texts simply by noticing whether people in stories and photographs have equal chances at happiness, and if not, what forces in society are holding them back from that chance at happiness. You can model this idea by bringing in a magazine ad, for instance, and showing your students that when you looked at it you wondered, "Why does the picture show only young white [heterosexual] couples with two children when it is advertising condos for sale in Cancun, Mexico? What magazine does this ad appear in? Who is the target audience for this ad? Who can afford to buy these condos, and why? Why couldn't some of the people in the ad be persons of color?" Until we question and speak back to the status quo—the "natural" and "normal" ways texts go—we cannot begin to change the status quo.

## Moving Forward

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In *For a Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action*, Randy and Katherine Bomer suggest beginning this work by teaching the major concepts that enable students to think across texts using critical lenses. This ability, according to Webb's depth-of-knowledge levels, continues to develop over a lifetime, and your students will need lots of practice and experience. The most important of these concepts is "groups." You can ask students to use webs, lists, and Venn diagrams (or to invent their own ways) to depict all the groups they belong to. You will need to model your own groups so that they understand the variety of ways in which people associate with one another. You may begin with your selfhood. You might, for instance, belong to the following groups: male/female; Indian, Korean, African American, Irish American, Haitian; teacher; piano player; tennis player; over-fifty; single father; bird owner, and so on. Some of the groups seem fixed, such as your race and ethnicity. Others, though, are more diverse and fluid: artists, "extreme sports" fans, coffee drinkers, Stephanie Meyer fans. "Groups" becomes a critical concept when some groups, by virtue of size, wealth, and cultural power, oppress more vulnerable groups and keep the people in them from attaining a healthy, happy life. In our United States culture, females, persons of color, immigrants, and students are just some of the groups that have experienced unequal chances in life at the hands of groups, such as males and Caucasians, that have historically held more power and wealth.

Then think about the issues one group faces. For example, *best friends* might face the issue of belonging and peer pressure, while *females* might face issues of appearance and bias. Again, as reading partners share, encourage students to look for commonalities that groups share (people belonging to the groups *boys* and *girls* might face the same issue of peer pressure, for example). After students have done some of this work in relation to themselves, they can try it with a character in a class read-aloud or in their book club or independent reading book. For example, Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, a member of the groups *daughter*, *older sister*, and *fighter*, faces the issues of violence and societal pressure. This work in the beginning of the unit prepares adolescents for the complex work of reading for social issues—social groups face more than one issue and react in more than one way.

Applying this concept to books, articles, poems, songs, photographs, ads, and billboards, readers can ask such critical questions as "If the character/subject in this text has problems, can you see how those problems are about having or not having money, struggling with others for power, or being cheated or helped by society's rules?" Eventually, with practice, readers can apply critical concepts to any book, even the simplest, wondering whether people are being treated fairly by one another or by the author. Or they might read any book as a metaphor for critical concepts. For instance, the classic picture book *Swimmy*, by Leo Lionni—in which the little school of fish forms into one giant fish, with Swimmy, the only "black" fish, forming its eye, in order to scare the predator fishes—can be read as a metaphor for community organizing and peaceful resistance against a larger, more powerful, and life-threatening force. This is a more politically active take on a book that is often used in classrooms to demonstrate

acceptance of someone who is “different.” In one classroom, a student read the fact that Swimmy is black as racism on the part of Lionni, but the other students defended Lionni, saying that the author made the black fish the smartest one—in fact, he is the hero!

For the first few days of a critical reading study, you might want to have readers trying out their critical lenses on a variety of amazing picture books that clearly portray situations of power and oppression. Critical questions, musings, and observations will be easier with these texts and help students solidify in their mind the difference between groups holding power over other groups and individual emotional issues between characters. Books particularly rich for this study are listed in the additional resources section of this curricular plan.

Once readers have some understanding of critical concepts, you can have them look at any texts through those lenses. This is more difficult, and perhaps not possible for many students, because their understandings of how the world operates are naturally naïve and unformed. You can help by modeling looking at anything you read and wondering how hidden and subtle sources of power, race, class, and gender operate in our culture. This also allows the students, as the Common Core State Standards suggest, to work on using what they know of the world and the struggles of its myriad communities to help them make their way through complex texts.

At this point, you might decide to have clubs form around a set of texts, including novels, stories, nonfiction articles, poems, and pictures, of one historical period. Or you might form groups around a particular lens—power, justice, race, class, gender—then turn that lens on whatever texts the group decides to read.

An exciting possibility for doing this work might be to have your students bring their favorite picture books, magazines, comic books, video games, even movies to their critical reading club to study through the new lenses of social justice. One of Katherine Bomer’s students once brought an “Archie” comic book in and showed it to his “women’s rights” book club as an example of sexism. Betty and Veronica were doing all the cooking and waiting on Archie and Reggie as the two young men sat back watching football with their feet up. “That’s how TV and movies always portray males and females,” Connor said, “But in my family, my mom works as an actress all day and my dad cooks all the meals. Why can’t you ever see that in a TV commercial or comedy?”

Students like Connor, who are deeply engaged in their reading and thinking about a particular issue, will become fired up and begin to see that issue everywhere in their lives, as well as in the texts they read. This provides more teaching opportunities; you can help students see their own lives as another text, laid out on the table alongside the texts of other authors. Ultimately, you want students to be able to troubleshoot these issues, understanding their complexities and why they are not so simple to solve. Reading across texts and looking at their own lives as backdrops to their reading work will help students see that the issues their characters face have multiple perspectives and multiple causes, some of which are not what they seem.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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When starting this unit, you will want to organize your minilessons in a way that reaches your students where they are. Listening to student talk, reading recent notebook entries, and reviewing reading logs are all great ways to gather fresh data on your students' reading lives in order to decide the path that you will take for this unit. One such path is detailed below. As you consider these teaching points, think about how you will model doing this work. You can draw from previous read-alouds, movies, music, games, and ads. You students will not be able to do this without your demonstrative guidance.

### Before the Unit

- Decide how you want social issue clubs to proceed. What resources do you have? Will groups be reading a common text? Several common texts? Different texts but with a focus?
- What do you want the focus of your teaching to be? Do you want kids to do the challenging work of learning how to identify issues and locate text-based examples that support those issues, or will your readers need your support to identify issues they will then support with examples and evidence?

### Getting Started: Thinking and Reading Critically

- "Characters in books belong to groups—just as we do. When readers read we can think about whether the groups in the book are all being treated fairly by other characters and by the author."
- "Issues hide within the pages of books that we know well. One way that we can unearth major social issues in books is by looking at the character's struggles and asking ourselves, 'What causes this character to struggle? What larger problem does this represent?'"
- Students who have not done much of this work before may need some help determining exactly what social issues are and how they are present across books. You may want to spend a day modeling that work for them.
- "Careful readers read with a lens. First we read for the story or for what happens, but as we read, we should also be asking ourselves, 'What does this story teach me about this issue? How?'"
- "Smart readers mark texts thematically. We can annotate the text in moments when we see the characters first facing an issue, when we see them struggling with an issue, and when they overcome or fail to overcome an issue."
- "Smart readers also think about other media in which an issue is present. What other books, movies, music, films, or games show characters entrenched in sim-

ilar struggles? How do those media show the struggle?" Show kids how to go back to previously read texts or to reference older material as they continue to draw conclusions about their current material.

- "Another thing wise readers can do is critique the text. One way to initiate our critiques is to pretend that we are someone else. How would someone different from me view this text? What would he or she notice, what would he or she say about it?"
- "Readers can also reread parts of texts through different lenses to see what we might have missed before. We could simply choose another issue and ask ourselves, 'As I read again, what am I learning about this issue?'"

### **Reading through a Lens and Talking Back to the Text**

- "As growing readers, once we locate the issues in our books, we can read looking for scenes in which that issue is all over the place. These are often the best scenes to talk and write about!"
- "Sometimes readers discuss or write about an issue before going to the place in the text where we think the issue might be present. As we read, astute readers try to think about the story and bounce back to our ideas. Moving back and forth from ideas to story is one of the most fun ways to read."
- "Once readers identify an issue, we can examine how deep that issue runs in our own lives by asking pointed questions like, 'Does the way this story talks about gender ring true for me?' We can examine why the text reflects or does not reflect our experiences of these issues."
- "Smart readers can see what a text values or what the writer feels is important. One of the ways we do this is by thinking about whose experiences might be true in the text and whose experiences might be absent."
- "Readers can develop issues that we care deeply about, and we come to much of our reading with that lens in mind. So each time I read I might ask myself, 'What does this text seem to be saying (or not saying) about this issue?'"
- "Readers are members of many different groups at the same time, and those groups shape how we experience the books that we read and how we experience the world."
- "Readers in groups have the luxury of being able to talk back to texts in really interesting ways. In addition to having lenses in our mind, we can have questions in our mind. Some questions to hold in our mind that can give us some things to talk about are: 'Are we okay with how this group is being represented? Does this fit with what we have seen in the world? Is there something that the author seems to want us to know about being a member of that group?'"
- "Readers can look to learn more about the issues we care about by collecting and reading different kinds of texts—especially nonfiction!"





## UNIT NINE

# From Author Studies to Independent Projects

## *Launching a Summer of Reading*

### JUNE

#### Overview

Nothing is more essential to our students' reading lives than reading. Research studies validate the experience you have each new September—students who spent time over the summer reading have maintained or improved their reading level; students who did not have often dropped their reading level, lost stamina, became less fluent. Think back to the start of this year and the frustration you felt when you found students who fell behind over the summer. You have an opportunity, now, to launch your students into a summer of reading, building up their interest, helping them imagine ahead, beyond their current book, to the ones that will follow.

In this unit of study, whatever their levels and previous successes, your students will recarve their identities as readers. Specifically, they will identify one book, one author, 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 readers can do. Think of that friend of yours (or perhaps it's you) who always has her pulse on the newest books, who namedrops favorite authors and knows how those authors are changing. This way of being clearly connects your friend (or you) to the "literary world," and you can teach your students to live their reading life in a similar way. 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.

Setting students up to do this work is a bit of sneaky-teacher trickery. It's not likely your students will read every book written by an author before the end of the year if

they have not done so already. Helping your students set up a “playlist” of their author’s biggest hits and perhaps having a similar author’s work on deck means that once they are wrapped up in that reading they will inevitably push their reading into the summer.

## Preparing Text Sets and Setting Up Clubs

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This month, no ordinary author will do. You’ll want to pick the strongest, bestselling, most popular authors to anchor this unit. Several names pop to mind: Suzanne Collins, Walter Dean Myers, Jacqueline Woodson, Rick Riordan, Laurie Halse Anderson, Anthony Horowitz, James Howe, Gary Soto, Gary Paulsen, Laurence Yep, Judy Blume—this can 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’s also a good idea to ask your readers outright. Distribute slips of paper on which they write the title of the one or two books 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 assemble.

Take your students’ interests into account. Do some of your boys crave Gary Paulsen–esque 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 from a Rick Riordan novel? 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). In addition to writing at many levels, Paulsen has various types 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-level 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 children up to 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 one another in multiple ways throughout the month’s work.

Try to keep to no more than four students per club. If half the class opts fervently for the same favourite author, you might create two clubs for this one author, 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 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.

## Selecting Your Read-Alouds

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You will want to choose read-aloud texts that best support the reading work students will be doing in this unit and that can be used to best demonstrate the work we want readers to do independently. As you make these choices, it is important to consider the length of the books, because the bulk of the work in this unit relies on looking across many different texts by the same author. One recommendation would be to choose picture books written by authors who have also written some short stories or short novels. However, you might decide that two short, well-written novels could work beautifully as well. When choosing your read-aloud texts, remember that the work you are doing in read-aloud will transfer to the books that students in your classroom are reading. For example, you could begin with Cynthia Rylant's picture books *When I Was Young in the Mountains* and *An Angel for Solomon Singer*, then move to some short stories from her well-loved anthology *Every Living Thing*.

## Unit Sequence

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This unit begins with getting to know an author by reading or rereading one or two books by her or him. Many musicians, particularly hip-hop musicians, discuss how important it is to their development as music lovers and music makers to listen to a particular song over and over again until they know it by heart. Most musicians talk about writing down the lyrics to the song and memorizing them 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 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 the author's other books.

The second part will push children 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 texts. At this stage, clubs can begin to analyse themes that recur in this author's books and also to evaluate the bigger life messages that the author seems to bring 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 this 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 into the summer, using every-

thing they've learned about reading fandom 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

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How does one really get to know an author? Flocks throng to see Hans Christian Anderson's Copenhagen house, tourists seek out and touch the bronze statue of C. S. Lewis'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. To become an expert on an author, we don't need to visit their shrine or hometown or even interview them. To become an expert on an author, readers devour as many books by that author as we can lay our hands on. We read and reread favorite parts and underline the lines that make us laugh aloud or stop to think again. This is the message with which you'll want to begin this unit on author studies, teaching clubs simply to read and reread books their favorite author has written, just as a fan of any other artist's work would visit and revisit that artist's work.

This will mean different things for different readers. For readers who begin this study having read only a single book by the author, you might suggest they start by *rereading* the one book they do know. One of the first steps we want to teach our students to take as readers, whether this is their first or twenty-first book by this author, is to allow themselves to become starry-eyed. 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 being in some other way impressed by their author. Just as one who is first falling in love can only see what makes the other person amazing—even *his sneezes are amazing*—we want our 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. At first you might say to your class, "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? Pay attention to the characters your 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 them.

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. Children could revisit 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 up to the point 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 in order to become more passionate and informed readers. Retelling alone will certainly not allow them to reach that goal. You want to teach students to have the kinds of conversations that lovers of books have on a regular basis. It might help 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? For example, you 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 you 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**

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Without even knowing that we’re doing it, we tend to mimic whatever we love. This is especially true of adolescents. They’ll talk like their friends, dress like the stars they idolize, and even copy moves from their parents (even if they don’t like to admit it). With explicit instruction children can certainly note and name the specific craft moves that favorite authors make—and internalize them 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 to pay attention to the science behind the trick so that they, too, can create similar magic.

One way you 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 by the same author. For example, you might show students how they can use a story booklet or story 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 in their reading notebook a short section of text they love from each of the books they’ve read so far and to study them for sentence variation, punctuation, even word choice. You might also consider teaching students that they can try their hand at writing into the gaps between these passages, imagining

what happens in 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 Laurie Halse Anderson!

Finally, it's worth mentioning, that if your students are working on independent writing projects in writing workshop at this time, the authors they are studying in this unit could very well be mentor authors for their writing pieces. Students can try their hand, even if experimentally, in their notebooks, at writing pieces of dialogue or descriptive passages in the style and cadence of their author.

### Part Three: Becoming an Author Expert

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If J. K. Rowling were to release a new book tomorrow, it would be read one way by a Rowling newbie (a reader for whom this is the first book by her) and completely differently by a Rowling fan (one who's devoured every Harry Potter and Beedle the Bard book ever written, several times). While the newbie might read with casual interest, the fan's reading would buzz with cross-textual references, memories of previous Rowling characters and plotlines, and 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 children 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 favourite 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 this author typically addresses. 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 about. Recall some of the more common literary themes that your children 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 children 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 children 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 mother comfort in someone else or something else.



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 Morrison*. Or, *With this book, Morrison has grown as an author, she touches new, previously unexplored themes such as \_\_\_\_*. Or, *This is Morrison at her most eloquent, surpassing even the vivid imagery she achieved in \_\_\_\_*. Only the critic who has immersed himself or herself in a thorough study of Morrison's work would be able to make claims such as these. By this point in the unit, our children must do no less. As their club conversations build to form a clear picture of this author's literary identity, children are in a position to tell us whether their book is *typical Myers* or *Myers at his most moving*. You might teach children 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 Reflect on How Authors Have Changed Them (and Set Plans for Summer Reading)

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Reading changes the way we look at the world. Reading Michael Pollan might make one forever look at the food they eat with caution, reading Zinsser might mean we never again write a sentence in quite the same careless way, and even a *Cosmopolitan* article might alter the way we look at stripes or collars. For children, a favorite author does far more than entertain with a story. From favorite authors, children might learn important distinctions between courage and cowardice, callousness and empathy, honor and disgrace. For this last part of the unit, you might invite children 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 help one another explore the lessons that the author teaches us in one book or again and again across various books. Urge children to connect these lessons with the issues they themselves see or face in everyday life.

This work requires children to nurture and develop an idea and is therefore quite suited to be a writing task. You might decide to have children pen a quick literary essay explaining their connection to a particular book or particular author. This work can be started slowly in the reading notebook as children 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 meetings, they may share these jottings with peers. Or you may choose to replace a club meeting with a quiet period of writing so that children can flesh out the personal responses reading invokes in them.

By this point in the unit, your readers will not only know their authors backward and forward but also have learned things about themselves and what it is that connects them to certain authors, certain books. This is the perfect point to start thinking about how students might move into the future—in this case, their summer vacation. 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—through the public library, book orders, book swaps, even loans from the class library—to gather enough texts by their authors to keep them reading for the whole summer. Depending on your students and the community in which your school is located, students might even want to hold follow-up book club meetings at the local public library, complete with a summer reading agenda. Or you might assemble special summer reading book baggies, complete with sticky notes and a bookmark, that students can pop 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—chomping at the bit to get started—not see it as a damper on their summer vacation. As the saying goes, you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

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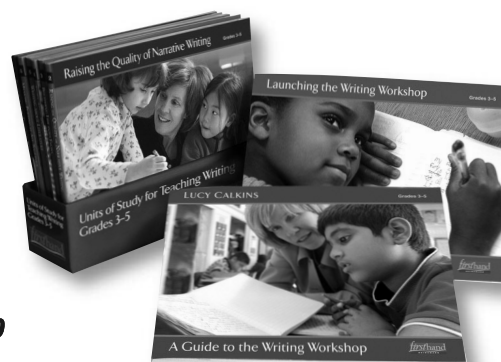
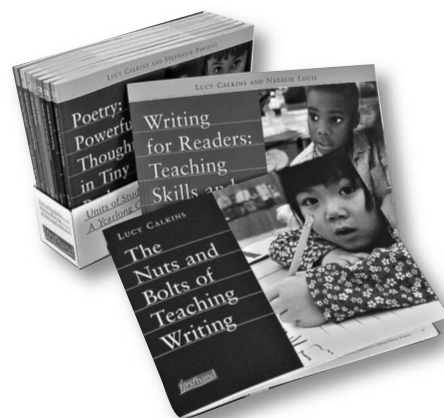
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