



COMMON CORE READING & WRITING WORKSHOP

# A CURRICULAR PLAN FOR The Reading Workshop

GRADE **3**



LUCY CALKINS AND COLLEAGUES FROM  
THE READING AND WRITING PROJECT





A CURRICULAR PLAN FOR  
**The Reading Workshop**  
**Grade 3**

Common Core Reading and Writing Workshop

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



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# Contents

OVERVIEW OF THE YEAR FOR THIRD-GRADE READERS .....	1
UNIT 1: Building a Reading Life .....	18
UNIT 2: Following Characters into Meaning: <i>Envision, Predict, Synthesize, and Infer</i> .....	32
UNIT 3: Series Book Clubs .....	48
UNIT 4: Nonfiction Reading: <i>Expository Texts</i> .....	70
UNIT 5: Mystery Book Clubs .....	86
UNIT 6: Biography Book Clubs .....	99
UNIT 7: Test Preparation .....	112
UNIT 8: Informational Reading: <i>Reading, Research, and Writing in the Content Areas</i> .....	136
UNIT 9: Social Issues Book Clubs .....	143



# Overview of the Year for Third-Grade Readers

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SEPTEMBER	UNIT 1: Building a Reading Life
OCTOBER	UNIT 2: Following Characters into Meaning: <i>Envision, Predict, Synthesize, and Infer</i>
NOVEMBER	UNIT 3: Series Book Clubs
LATE NOVEMBER/ DECEMBER	UNIT 4: Nonfiction Reading: <i>Expository Texts</i>
JANUARY	UNIT 5: Mystery Book Clubs
FEBRUARY/MARCH	UNIT 6: Biography Book Clubs
MARCH/APRIL	UNIT 7: Test Preparation
MAY	UNIT 8: Informational Reading: <i>Reading, Research, and Writing in the Content Areas</i>
JUNE	UNIT 9: Social Issues Book Clubs

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Each year, the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project gathers together the members of our community—the teachers, coaches, schools leaders, and staff developers—to reconceptualize the curricular calendars to reflect the latest research and innovations in the teaching of reading. This year, you’ll notice most dramatically the effect of the Common Core Standards in the emphasis, across the year and within each unit, on analytical thinking and reading skills. This community has

merged its expertise to create curriculum and link that curriculum to tried-and-true teaching pedagogy so that children may rise to the highest levels demanded by the Common Core State Standards. This is demanding work, and as you study the curriculum, you may find that colleagues will want to form some study groups to ensure that teacher leaders in your school are developing the expertise needed to truly teach children to be powerful readers of complex texts.

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

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

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

## Changes from Last Year to This Year

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Across all the units this year, you will see increased emphasis on the skill of interpretation. This work is in response to the Common Core State Standards, which raise the expectations for readers across all grade levels, moving them toward more sophisticated reading work. The unit "Following Characters into Meaning" has been split, putting some of the character work into the unit "Series Book Clubs." In "Following Characters into Meaning," children will think deeply about characters and grow theories. In "Series

Book Clubs,” children will grow more complex theories. “Series Book Clubs” provides children with the opportunity to read multiple books on a set of characters, and, in doing so, carry theories they grow across books in that series. Carrying a theory across books makes revising and forming more complex theories easier for kids, so this is a more supportive structure. Also, it provides children with more time to study characters, thinking deeply about them, so they will have greater chances to do the work and move beyond the simplistic ideas such as “characters are nice and kind.”

In addition to separating the character work across two units, a new part was added into “Series Book Clubs.” During the third part of the unit, children will compare and contrast characters and themes across texts. This work will build upon the theory work that children have done up to this point. Children will create theories in each of the texts that they read and then compare these theories as they move from text to text, ultimately revising their theories and creating new ones as they do this work.

The emphasis on interpretation was also carried into the mystery unit. The mystery genre is typically a moralistic black and white, intended to teach right from wrong. Someone commits a crime and the detective must figure out who did it so that the person can be stopped. The genre naturally supports the work of interpretation. So, in addition to the work on prediction and close reading of the text to find clues, you will find that there are lessons on studying the characters’ decisions and learning from them, asking themselves if they would do the same thing in that situation. Readers will think about motivations and strong emotions, carrying forward all their character work through the angle of finding life lessons in texts.

This year, we also made narrative nonfiction its own unit of study, creating Biography Book Clubs. This provides more time to read expository text during the December unit while also providing more space to delve into narrative nonfiction. During this unit, children will bring their fiction reading to nonfiction, using what they know about stories to make meaning. Just as the character work of growing theories was carried into series and mystery book clubs, so too it was brought into this unit. Again, children will use their reading strategies to extract life lessons from the texts they are reading. This carryover from the prior units will strengthen their narrative nonfiction reading skills and set them up for the final part in the unit, during which they will apply all that they know about reading narrative nonfiction to a range of narrative texts.

Then too, you will notice changes in the unit of study “Informational Reading: Reading, Research, and Writing in the Content Areas.” This unit has been reworked so that it differs greatly from the content area units in grades 4 and 5. And, the work in this unit pulls from the work that has been outlined in the Content Area Curricular Calendar, a resource we developed this year. Children will use reading and writing as tools to summarize and analyze information. As with the prior units, you will also see a heavy emphasis on growing ideas and interpreting texts.

Finally, “Social Issues Book Clubs” will end the year in reading. This unit has long been a favorite of teachers and children alike. The increased engagement that builds during this unit is the perfect send-off to summer. It will build an excitement for reading that will motivate kids to continue reading throughout the summer months. Then too, during this

unit children learn how to create text sets, putting books together based on a topic of interest and reading through those books to explore that interest. This is the work that we want them to do over the vacation. Providing them with a chance to do this during this school year will set them up to do this independently during the break.

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

Assessing reading is enormously complex. Reading is every bit as rich, 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 children’s reading in ways that give us as full a view as possible. New York City teachers have all been asked to track each child’s progress in reading and to send the results of those assessments home at regular intervals throughout the year.

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

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

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

The truth is that using a short passage and a handful of questions to ascertain whether a child can read, say, a 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 within *Units of Study*. But the system of tracking readers’ progress along a gradient of text difficulty does provide an infrastructure to your reading workshop and allows a teacher to have some handle on kids’ progress.

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

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

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

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

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

Grade	WPM	Grade	WPM
1	60–90	6	195–220
2	85–120	7	215–245
3	115–140	8	235–270
4	140–170	9	250–270
5	170–195	12	250–300

*Harris and Sipay (1990)*

## Reading Level Bands of Difficulty

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

Some of your readers will enter third-grade reading within the K–M text band. In these books, it is sometimes a challenge for readers to carry a storyline through the chapters of the book. The good news is that the chapters and the episodes will tend to be short, and the book's title and the blurb on the back will usually highlight the main plotline. Readers of these books should not have much trouble identifying the main character's traits because the character's feelings may change, but the traits generally stay consistent and are often related to the central problem and/or the solution. These

readers will need help dealing with tricky words. Many, many children get stalled at level M—so plan on leading guided reading groups and otherwise providing special support to get these children over that hump and into level N books.

Most third graders will read in the N–Q band of text difficulty. The texts are more complex at this level. Before now, the reader needed to follow a single story line of a main character who encounters one main problem, and comes to one main solution, but now there is apt to be more than one cause of a problem, and the problem itself may be multidimensional. If a teacher asked the skilled reader of texts in this band of difficulty, “What’s the central problem in this story?” the reader would be wise to stall a bit over the question, and to suggest that there is more than one problem, or that the problem has different parts of different layers. In this band of levels, the plot and the main character will be more complex.

Although characters are more complex, the character will come right out and tell readers how he or she feels, what he or she is like. Then later in the book, the character will act in certain ways, and it will be up to the reader to supply the label for what that action reveals. Usually that label will have been provided earlier by the character or the narrator. So characters will be complex, but readers will be told about this complexity. It will not be subtle. Readers at this level will probably need help dealing with figurative language.

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

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Another window into students’ reading is the spelling inventory designed by Donald Bear et al. This spelling inventory is not about getting the word right. It indicates the *spelling features* that students control, such as beginning and ending consonants, long and short vowels, the variety of suffixes, and so on. The spelling inventory reveals a child’s developmental level on graphophonics and also suggests the level of text at which a student will be successful. You can use this as a source of information to draw upon when determining students’ reading levels. More importantly, this information will suggest the word study work that will most benefit this reader. It is the act of reading across this information that is most important. You may refer to the assessment section of the TCRWP website ([www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com)) to access more information about spelling inventories.

## Maintaining Reading Logs

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We recommend that schools establish and implement policies so that each child in the school (grades 2–8) maintains a daily record of the books he or she reads in school and at home. This log must contain the title, author, the level of difficulty (for example, level P), the numbers of minutes the child spent reading, and the starting and ending page number. Some people question whether it is necessary to include the level of difficulty (when it is available). Our response is that this provides the teacher with

vital information that exponentially increases the usefulness of the tool. For example, if a child devotes a week to reading *The Stolen Pony*, and we know that book is level M (the level of the *Magic Treehouse* books), then we know that the child has done an alarmingly small amount of reading during that week. On the other hand, if the book is level Z, then we would draw a different conclusion.

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

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

After a few weeks, we suggest you encourage children to study their own reading logs in order to articulate their reading habits. Children can work analytically with their partners to notice and think about changes in the average number of pages they’ve read. Children can also notice the genre choices they have made across time and the relationship between genres or levels and volume. They can discuss patterns by studying the time they spend reading at home versus at school. The logs provide an irreplaceable window into students’ reading lives. It is helpful to gather logs across one grade after a month, or across several grades, to compare how much students are reading and how they are moving through books.

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

- A general rule of thumb is that a child should read approximately three-quarters of a page a minute. (This rule of thumb works across texts of varying levels because, generally, as the pages become denser, the reader’s abilities also become stronger.) A teacher and/or a principal will want to take notice if a child is reading a book at a dramatically slower rate than this. For example, alarms should go off if a child reads eight pages in thirty minutes. Why is the child not reading closer to twenty-four pages in that length of time? There may, of course, be good reasons.
- If a child reads an amount—say, thirty-four pages—during a half-hour in school, then brings that same book home and claims to read a much smaller amount—say, eight pages—within half an hour of reading time at home, alarms should go off. Is the child actually making enough time for reading at home?

- If you suggest the child reads books that are Level T, and she instead reads many books that are far easier, this discrepancy must be researched and addressed. Perhaps the easier books are nonfiction texts and the child has wisely found that when reading nonfiction, she needs to search for books she can read with meaning. Perhaps the child recently completed a very taxing book and wants some easier reads. Then too, perhaps the child simply can't find other books that are more challenging and needs your help.
- It is crucial to let parents know if the volume of reading their child is doing is high, fairly high, quite low, or very low. The wonderful thing about this information is that parents can do something about it, and progress on this one front will have enormous payoff for every aspect of a child's reading development.

Above all, student logs are a way to be sure that everyone—teachers, principals, and students—keeps their eyes on the volume of reading that children are doing. Dick Allington's research suggests that it takes four hours for a student who reads 200 wpm to complete *Hatchet*. The chart that follows shows how long it should take students to complete different leveled books. Assuming that your students read for thirty minutes in class and thirty minutes at home, at a rate of 200 wpm, then you should expect a student to finish reading *Hatchet* in eight days, which seems reasonable. You may find that a particular child takes twice as long to read *Hatchet*. This should prompt some research. Why is this child reading especially slowly? (If the child is reading below 120 accurate wpm, then alarm bells should go off. This child should be reading easier texts! Or perhaps the child is sitting in front of a text rather than reading it.)

How Long Should It Take a Child to Read a Book According to His or Her Reading Level?				
Title	Level	Approx # of words	Reading rate	# of minutes per book
<i>Henry and Mudge</i> (Rylant)	J	800–1000	100 WPM	10 minutes
<i>Horrible Harry</i> (Kline)	L	4500	100 WPM 200 WPM	45 minutes 25 minutes
<i>Magic Tree House Series</i> (Osborne)	M	6000	100 WPM 200 WPM	60 minutes 30 minutes
<i>Henry Series</i> (Cleary)	O	25000	100 WPM 200 WPM	4 hours 2 hours
<i>Howliday Inn</i> (Howe)	P	30000	100 WPM 200 WPM	5 hours 2½ hours
<i>Stone Fox</i> (Gardiner)**	P	12000	100 WPM 200 WPM	2 hours 1 hours
<i>Hatchet</i> (Paulsen)**	R	50000	100 WPM 200 WPM	8 hours 4 hours
<i>Missing May</i> (Rylant)**	W	24500	100 WPM 200 WPM	4 hours 2 hours

\*\*Allington (2000)

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

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

By this time, however, the entire school has been working for a year or two to match readers to books. Therefore, it should no longer be necessary for you to begin the year with children in the holding pattern of reading through a random collection of books from a crate at the center of the table. Instead, your class roster will convey the level of just-right books that each child was reading at the end of the previous school year. Ideally, children will also keep logs of the books they read during the summer so you can estimate whether a child's reading progressed or took a dive during those crucial months. If a child did not read during the summer, she will lose several levels. So if you ascertain from the summer log that this child read only a few books, then you will move her back two levels from where she ended the previous school year. If a child did a lot of just-right reading during the summer, that child can resume reading at the level he or she was reading in June. In this way, you can rely on reading records to start the year off with each child reading from a short stack of appropriate books.

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

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

When you do begin to do running records, we suggest you call three children over to you at a time, each carrying a book. Get one child started on the TCRWP formative assessment. While you listen to his or her reading, the other two can read independently. The assessed child needn't finish the passage before you ascertain whether it is too hard;

and if it is, move to another passage right away. Once one child has read aloud one hundred words and you have recorded the child's miscues, he or she can read the rest of the passage silently while you get the second child—who will already be right beside you—started reading aloud to you.

## The Components of Balanced Literacy

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The term *balanced literacy* comes, in part, from the recognition that readers need a variety of different opportunities to learn. The reading workshop provides children with time to read with a mentor who is a passionately engaged reader and wears his or her love of reading on the sleeve. It gives opportunities to talk and sometimes write about reading, and with explicit instruction in the skills and strategies of proficient reading. All of this is incredibly important, but alone, it is not sufficient. Children also need the opportunities to learn from other components of balanced literacy.

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

## Reading Aloud

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

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

way as to support the development of a particular comprehension skill. Based on this decision, the teacher decides to demonstrate and then scaffold children in using either one or many skills and strategies.

If you decide, for example, to highlight envisionment, then insert Post-its in a couple of places during the first pages of the read-aloud, as a reminder to pause as you read, to lower the book, and to muse a bit. Perhaps you can say, “I’m just picturing this. I can see Artie in the lead, walking down the path in the woods. It’s a narrow path, so Cleo is a few steps behind—there’s just room for one of them. The sun is filtering through the canopy of leaves overhead.” Of course, the teacher’s envisionment could spin on and on and on—it is important to stay brief! After demonstrating in such a manner for thirty seconds, tuck in a comment that names what has been done, like “Readers, I don’t really know that the path is narrow—the book hasn’t said that. But I draw on all the forest trails I’ve ever seen, adding details from my own experiences. When I read on, though, sometimes I need to revise my picture. Let’s see.” Once the teacher has demonstrated the skill (in this case, envisioning) a few times, across perhaps three or four pages of the read-aloud, the teacher is apt to pause in the midst of reading and scaffold the children in envisioning. “I can just see the river, can’t you? I’m picturing it—the colors . . . I’m hearing stuff too, aren’t you? . . . Use all the rivers you’ve ever stood beside to help you imagine the river.” Sometimes these pauses are followed with, “Tell the person beside you what you are seeing, hearing . . .” and sometimes they lead to the prompt, “Stop and jot what you see, what you hear.” Either injunction can, a moment or two later, be followed with specific tips: “Make sure you are talking/writing in details. Are you using specific words to make your mental movie real?”

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

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

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

## Supporting Children’s Vocabulary

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

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

Teach children that when they come to unfamiliar words in a text, it really helps to pronounce the word as best as they can, trying it out one way and then another to see if any pronunciation sounds familiar. Then ideally, the reader reads on past that word for just a bit before pausing to reread the section, thinking, "What might this word mean?" The good reader substitutes a reasonable synonym—thus, the "ominous" clouds become the "rainy" clouds—and reads on. Some teachers tape an index card to each child's desk so that children can collect a few such words throughout the day, with page numbers for references. The children and teacher should aim to use these same words in conversations with each other and the class.

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

## Finding Great Literature to Refresh or Fill Up Libraries

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is a good time, too, for you to consider whether you have planned minilessons that are too long or complicated, that are usurping too much of students' reading time. Most teachers use the strategy of demonstration and, more specifically, of thinking aloud, in reading minilessons. If you do this, try to make the reading and thinking *feel* like *reading*, which usually means holding the book in your lap, reading aloud from the

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

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

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

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

The books a student keeps in his or her bin will all be equivalent in level, except in two instances. First, an English language learner who is literate in his or her first language will read difficult books in the native language and easier books in English. Second, when a student is transitioning to a new book level, that student's book bin will contain books at both the comfort level and the new instructional level. Ideally, the latter will be books the teacher has introduced to the student; this works especially well if you introduce the first book in a series of two or three books because one book provides an introduction to the next. If a reader is working with a slightly more difficult text

(96%, not 98% accuracy) this is an important time to be sure that the student's partner is reading the same slightly more challenging book, so the two partners can support each other.

You will also want to teach students procedures for keeping track of their volume of reading. Earlier we described the cumulative reading log, which is absolutely essential for you and for the reader. You will need to make sure these logs become integral to the reading workshop. Every day during reading time, each student needs to get his or her log out along with his or her book. Many September conferences will reference these logs. You might say, "I notice you've been reading faster. Has it been hard to hold on to the story as you read faster?" If a student's pace has slowed, you might ask, "What's slowing you down? I notice you read less today. What got in the way?" The log will also influence your observations. If you see from a glance at a student's log that the student is making slow progress through a book, observe the student as she reads silently, checking for any noticeable reading behaviors that might be slowing the student's pace. Does the student move her lips while reading, move her head from side to side, point at words as she reads, use a bookmark to hold her place as she reads, or read aloud to herself? If the student does any of these things, you will want to intervene. Tell her that she has graduated and no longer needs to engage in those behaviors. You may need to tell students that they should only read aloud when they come to tricky words, or devise other strategies to help them get into the habit of reading silently.

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

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

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



## UNIT ONE

# Building a Reading Life

## SEPTEMBER

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: M)

It is time to begin, to set your reading workshop into motion for the year. The biggest work, the work that unites and underlines everything you will do as a teacher of reading in this upcoming year, is to help all your children become avid readers. To do this, you will wear your own love of reading on your sleeve. You will help your readers fashion a literate identity for themselves. You will create a social life in your classroom that revolves around shared books. But most of all, to launch a lifelong passion for reading in your students, you will empower your readers to develop a sense of personal agency about their own reading. This means starting the year with a lesson on ownership. “You are responsible for building your own reading life” is the powerful message you want to send out at the very start of this yearlong collaboration. Research (such as that described in John Hattie’s *Visible Learning*, 2009) backs the fact that the most effective teaching practices result from the collaborative effort between students and their teachers in setting, and striving to meet, meaningful goals.

This unit follows the book *Building a Reading Life*, from the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading: Grades 3–5*. As you read this unit of study you will notice how it is aligned with the Common Core State Standards. If you have children reading levels H–K, you might find this work a bit sophisticated, and you will likely want to refer to the launching unit in the second-grade curricular calendar.

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

You are the leader of your class, and the leadership advice from Hattie pertains to you. Before the year begins, you need to decide how *you* will tap your readers’ talents and energies, and rally them to a common cause. Each year, many of you launch both a reading workshop and a writing workshop. You will want *this* year, *this* reading workshop,

and *this* writing workshop to be full of new hope and promise. How will you do this? Just as your children need a clear vision of what a powerful reader looks like, you too will want to have in your mind a vision of what a powerful reading workshop looks like. So much of our teaching is related to the tone we set in our classroom, as much as the specifics of any particular reading strategy that we teach. *A Guide to the Reading Workshop*, from *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*, is a valuable resource that provides help with creating a vision of what an effective reading classroom looks and feels like; it allows a box-seat view of several classrooms where kids and teachers are actively engaged in teaching and learning about reading.

In the series *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*, Calkins and Tolan suggest that at the start of the year, you would be wise to put a spotlight on each kid composing his or her very own independent reading life, a life contoured according to that particular reader. You'd also be wise to begin the year with renewed emphasis on children turning around along the path to study themselves as readers. If a child lists five beloved books he or she has read (or heard read aloud), then the child can look back on that list and think, "What does this list of favorite books reveal about me as a reader? What do I feel passionate about as a reader?" If a child reads and collects Post-its or jottings in a reader's notebook, then that child can look back on what he or she has written, thinking, "So what sort of thinking do I tend to do as I read? How am I unique among all these other readers?" Readers may be accustomed to conducting author studies, and we hope that at the start of the year you might consider asking kids to engage in *reader* studies.

## Establish Partnerships That Will Support Conversation across the Year

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During this unit, you will launch reading partnerships, telling readers that we do not travel alone through books. You'll also establish reading partnerships, which will eventually serve as the fundamental support for book clubs later in the year. You'll teach into the structure of partnerships in the third part of this unit, but you won't want to wait long to anticipate the work that readers will do in their partnerships. At the onset of this unit, you'll want to think toward the long-term partnerships that you will help establish and foster. As suggested in *Units of Study for Teaching Reading: A Curriculum for the Reading Workshop, Grades 3–5*, you'll want to create opportunities for partners to get to know each other in a special way, as readers. You will want to teach that partners pay attention to each other's reading histories, reading interests, and reading hopes. In teaching these important skills, you will teach partners to become a positive influence in another reader's life. Clarify also that each day readers will be doing some on-the-run writing, probably on Post-its. This writing will then be brought to the partner conversations. This writing work (brief though it must be) and the partner conversations (which will again be brief) are absolutely essential elements of a reading workshop. Classrooms often do not have enough duplicate books for partners to read in sync all the time, but even a little of this is tremendously helpful. If partners can't

read the same books, they can, and should, *swap* books. It is often helpful for readers to sit beside their partners during the reading workshop so the transition from reading to talking doesn't usurp valuable reading time (although sometimes this leads students to talk/read/talk/read throughout the reading workshop, which is not what you have in mind).

Partners can support each other in a variety of ways, and you'll want to let partners know they can often choose the work they'll do together. Readers will have placed Post-its in places where they had strong reactions to the text, and now partners can share and discuss these passages. Partner talk works well if one partner rereads a short passage aloud, one that elicited strong feelings in that reader, and then both partners can talk about why that reader reacted so strongly to that passage. After discussing the passage, it is helpful to reread it again, this time evoking more feelings in the read-aloud. Partners can also share books, retelling what happened so far and thinking about what might happen next. When partners do this retelling work, you can teach that we can skim the book as we retell it, holding the book as a concrete prop to scaffold a sequential retelling. Also, partners can summarize in big steps across an entire story, rather than retell in a fashion that inches across the text. If a partner retells his or her book, it is important for the other partner to really grasp the story and to be ready to ask clarifying questions. All of this work supports the speaking and listening standard for third graders outlined by the Common Core State Standards.

## **Part One: Making Reading Lives—Creating Reading Resolutions, Finding Just-Right Books, Reading Faster, Stronger, Longer, and Awakening Ourselves to Text**

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If the big goal of the year is to turn kids into avid, lifelong readers, then it is essential that from day one you create an environment that fosters a love of reading. As adults, we know that at its very best, reading is wonderful—it lures us to new worlds and allows us to live vicariously through characters we come to love, whose adventures we share. But reading can also be tedious—when the book we hold in our hands is too difficult, for example, or when it is about people and topics that just don't hold our attention. The very first thing you'll want to convey to children, then, is that *this year* reading is going to be the very best that it can be.

Of course, each of us has our own unique experiences of reading, and ideas of what makes reading go smoothly and what makes it drag. So you might begin by asking children to think back on times when reading was the best it could be and times when it was the pits, and then reflect on what made each of these times one way or the other. As children recall such times, suggest that they can create reading resolutions for themselves that draw on their experiences. That is, if one child recalls that the time he spent reading in the quiet of his grandmother's backyard was particularly special, he might decide to recreate a quiet reading spot for himself both in the classroom and at home. Another child may enjoy reading most when she has a stack of books by her side or

when she's reading about characters who are similar to her. Each child will have a specific sense of when reading works and when it doesn't, and these "times when" can inform the resolutions your children make.

As you lead children to talk about their reading histories and hopes, you will have lots of occasions to talk up goals you know will be important in the year ahead. Perhaps children will sketch pictures of one time or one book that really mattered to them, and then you will ask them to write or talk about these. You might ask kids: "What was it about that one reading time that made reading work for you?" and "How can we be sure that reading is just as magical in the year ahead?" Channel these discussions so that you end up highlighting what you plan to emphasize during this first month of your year.

Once children are armed with new reading resolutions and class goals, you'll share the big news: "You're the boss of your reading life," you'll say. "You get to make the decisions." Of course this isn't entirely the case. You'll assess children informally during these first few weeks to match them to books, and then steer them toward ones they can read. But for children to feel invested in reading—and to come to be independent readers—it's essential that they feel a sense of ownership of their reading lives, that they feel they have agency—and that you support this. As children browse the books you've compiled in bins, you'll have a chance to encourage this independence. You might tell them that books aren't "one size fits all." Only they can know when a book fits them. "If a book doesn't feel right for you, choose another," you might say. Remind readers of ways to check that the books they select are just-right for them; they should be able to read smoothly, with expression, to read most words without stumbling and, above all, to hold onto the story.

Just as you build up children's autonomy as readers, you'll want to build up their reading identities. You'll quickly come to know what children especially love as readers, and also what they do well. The Common Core State Standards place great emphasis on independence—helping children become self-directed learners. The goal is to bring out the uniqueness of each reader, and then to build upon each reader's strengths, inclinations, and passions. The kid who loves mysteries may help decide which new mysteries to buy for the class, and may promote mysteries with book buzz talks. The child who loves a particular author may gather books by that author and create a basket for the classroom library. Your job will be to take each child's habits and interests, and forge those into resolutions. In part, this emphasis both on reflecting on one's own skills, strategies, and passions and on developing one's own identity as a reader is meant to muffle the effect of the reading assessment work, which puts focus on a student's reading level. More importantly, however, this identity work is also meant to help readers develop a sense of personal agency in reading.

You'll want to roll out the reading tools that accompany the work of this unit. The most obvious tool would be a reading portfolio of a Reading Life, a place where readers' "stuff" accumulates. In this portfolio, readers would keep their reading logs of titles, levels, pages, and minutes. You'll also want to ask kids to keep occasional stop-and-jots in this portfolio. For example, at the start of a string of minilessons on determining

importance, you might ask readers to stop and jot at three intervals during the read-aloud, recording what they regard as especially important. You would definitely want to collect the work each reader did that day (with the child's name on the work) and sort it. You'll want to ask yourself, "Who is particularly strong at this, and what exactly did those strong readers do?" and "Who seems to struggle with this, and what do those students tend to do when asked to determine importance?" You'll no doubt want readers to look between their work and the work of their classmates, asking similar questions. This sort of work needs to accumulate in a student's reading portfolio and be juxtaposed with similar work the student does several weeks later.

As the part progresses, you'll continue to support children's independence, teaching them specific ways to grow as readers. You might, for example, teach them that readers who are aiming to read faster, stronger, and longer have little tips we can draw on to accomplish these goals. Some teachers give kids bookmarks that list tips such as: "Follow the words with my eyes, not my finger, while I read," or "Remember to read with feeling, so I hear my 'read-aloud' voice in my head" (for more examples, see Session IV of *Building a Reading Life*). You can also invite your readers to help set class goals, such as reading for a particular stretch of time each day, and aiming to read even more by a specific later date.

Of course, all the reading strategies in the world won't help if your children aren't engaged by their reading—and a large part of engagement comes from the way in which we choose to read a text. Just as readers make choices about what to read and where to read, they can also make choices about *how* to read. Spotlight for children the importance of staying alert to the text while they read, ready to be moved by the story—and even a little bit swept away. You might tell children that some people read themselves to sleep. As they get tired, they read the same lines again and again. Their eyes start to close, they lose their grip on the book, and soon they are fast asleep. "Let's be the kinds of readers that do the opposite," you might say. "Let's be the kinds of readers that read ourselves awake!" You might demonstrate what it means to do the opposite kind of reading—to read on autopilot. Read aloud a bit of text, racing through the words and reading them with a blank face and little expression. Then model for children what it looks like when you read yourself awake. Read the same bit of text out loud with lots of expression and pause to react to the text now and then, sharing your excitement and your thoughts.

So, if you are reading *Stone Fox*, you might open the book and read these lines with a rambling voice: "It was now the middle of September. The potatoes they had planted in early June took from ninety to one hundred twenty days to mature, which meant they must be harvested soon." Then, you might pause to say, "Whoa! I was racing past the words. That wasn't even reading!" Reread the section of text, this time attentive to it, using gestures and pauses to emphasize that words aren't passing you by. For example, you might read the lines, "Little Willy pleaded with him. But grandfather repeated, 'No, no, no!' The situation appeared hopeless," and then shake your head sadly and sigh.

You might even pull out a Post-it and mark the spots in the text that call to you and teach children that they too should do the same; they should mark places that speak

to them, places where the text stands out and calls to them as though it was written in large, bold print. Then, they can meet with a neighbor to share those places, reading the section aloud and discussing why it called to them.

By the end of this first part, you want to see children taking control of their reading lives, thinking about their reading identities, tucking into books they love and reading these with passion. Be sure to celebrate moments when you see children doing this work.

## **Part Two: Making Texts Matter—Holding Tight to Meaning, Building Relationships with Books, Creating a Buzz about Books, and Choosing Texts That Matter**

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In the first part, you taught children to select just-right books, to choose books with words they can read and stories they can hold onto. In this second part, you will want to build upon this work, emphasizing the importance of holding onto the story. Even in just-right books, readers hit confusing spots, losing the meaning. When this happens, we don't throw up our hands and give up. We don't just plow through without any sense of what we are reading. Instead, we recognize that we have lost the story, and we go back to the text to figure out what is happening. The Common Core State Standards note that third graders should "ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of the text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers."

At this point, children should be reading themselves wide awake, attending to the details on the page and building mental movies. Now you will want to teach them that they have to recognize the moments where they have gotten confused, the moments where the movie has gotten blurry. You might say: "Readers, our mental movies help us to know if we are following the story. When it's a clear picture, when we see it in high definition, we are holding onto what we are reading. When our picture gets blurry like the cable is scrambling, we have lost the text. When this happens, we need to recognize it and we need to fix it."

You will want children to own several strategies in their personal toolkits of reading strategies, so that when they do encounter difficulty, they have a range of ways to handle it in a way that will be most successful in getting their reading back on track. Teach them that sometimes readers keep reading, thinking "What's going on here?" and sometimes readers need to go back and reread to see if we missed something. Then, too, you might teach them that readers can slow down and look carefully at the details in the text.

Of course, you will want to teach children not only how to read well, but also how to love reading. You will want to convey to children that reading is more than seeing the words and holding onto the story. Reading is finding a way to make a story matter, and, to make a story matter, readers must open their hearts and minds to the text, reading the text like it's gold. You might say: "Readers, when we approach a text, we have a choice. We choose the relationship that we have with a text. We decide if we will be a curmudgeon, reading the text in a cranky way, or if we will let the text matter, reading

it like it's gold." Open your read-aloud to a section and read part of it like a curmudgeon, yawning, looking around the room, and reading with a distressed voice, hemming and hawing as you go. Then, you might say, "Let me try that again," and return to the text, this time reading it as though it's gold, savoring every word, reading every word with gestures and facial expressions that reflect rapt attention. Grab your chest, shake your head, pause, and let the words linger in the air as your jaw drops.

When you teach children that it is we who choose our relationship with a text, you are teaching them to be proactive and to feel optimistic as they build a reading life. Another way to achieve this goal is to teach children to recommend texts to each other, creating a book buzz in the classroom. In the first part, you encouraged children to play off their strengths, contributing to the makeup of the library. Now, your library is brimful of books that children are eager to read, and you have experts about these texts in your room—use these wonderful resources to build agency and engagement. Teach your children that readers everywhere recommend books to one another. As suggested by the Common Core State Standards, you might also want to teach that readers summarize the text, read part of it aloud, and, above all else, readers say why the book is special, and, in doing so, entice others to choose those books from the library and read them as though they are gold. Of course, children will be apt to give the whole book away. You will want to teach them that when enticing a reader, we don't tell everything. Instead, we tell them just enough to make another person want to read it.

With book buzzes humming about the room, next you will want to teach children that readers stock our baggies with books we are excited to read, that readers keep a stack of books beside us, on deck, waiting to be read. Now that we have heard lots of book recommendations, we may ask ourselves, "Who is good at recommending books for me?" Or, we think back on times we have found a great book and ask ourselves, "What did I do to find that book?" Then, too, we go to a section of the library, or to a basket in the library, that is labeled with a topic, author, or genre that we are interested in and look through the books it holds. To support this work, you will want to make sure that your library is accessible to children. Baskets should be clearly labeled, and you will want to create baskets that are leveled, as well as baskets that are unleveled. You might create a basket on award-winning authors, sports, or family issues. Enlist children to contribute their ideas as to what baskets could be available in the library based on their reading interests. Ask kids what they think should be added to the library so they are eager to pull books off the shelves and create a collection of books that matter to them.

You will likely find yourself reminding children that as we select books we are excited to read, as we select texts that matter to us, we must also make sure they are just-right for us. At times a text will be highly recommended, and we might be excited to read it, but we need to check that it is a just-right fit. As mentioned in Part One, this means that a child can read a text smoothly, with expression, that he or she can read most of the words without stumbling, and hold onto the story. The Common Core State Standards suggest that students are able to "determine meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text." Even in just-right texts, children will encounter words that

are hard for them. For some children, a word may be hard because it is unfamiliar, and they may have to sound it out. For others, the word is tricky because they do not know what it means. Teach children that when we encounter a word we do not know the meaning of, we can read forward, asking ourselves, “What might this mean?” Once we think we have a synonym for the word, we substitute the synonym and reread, asking ourselves, “Does that make sense? Could this word work?”

As the unit progresses, you will want to personalize your assessments. At the start, the main focus of your assessment was to match children to just-right reading levels. By now, that work should be done. Therefore, you will want to turn your assessment toward the big goals of the unit, and the big goals that you believe are important for readers at this time of year. Up to this point in the unit, you will have focused on building reading engagement. So, take time to assess children’s engagement as they read. Then, too, this unit—and this part in particular—has helped children to find texts that matter to them, texts they want to read like gold. Take time at this point to check in with that reading goal, asking yourself: “Are children reading books they are apt to like? Are they reading them faster, stronger, and longer than at the start?” Use the data that you gather to inform the work that you do. During the next part, you will launch reading partnerships. The information that you gather at this time can inform the partnerships you establish. You might think about each child’s strengths and struggles and then pair them with partners that are apt to be supportive.

### **Part Three: Bringing Together Reading Lives, Texts that Matter, and Partners**

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Independent reading is, in fact, not independent at all. It is actually *interdependent* reading. Readers recommend books to others, lend books to others, and talk about books with others. The books that often matter most to us are books we have shared. Conversations about books, and the relationships we build with other readers through conversations are combed throughout our reading lives. You will want to teach your children that they too can foster relationships with each other, and they can hold conversations that will comb through their reading lives. You will want to teach them to share texts, to hold conversations with partners that mirror the internal conversations you want them to have with themselves as they read.

The best way to start reading partnerships is to make time and space for kids to get to know each other as people, as readers. You will want to teach your children that readers pay attention to each other’s reading histories, reading interests, and reading hopes—and by doing so, we stand a chance of being a good influence on another’s reading life. You might begin by teaching children to interview each other, to ask questions of their reading partner, questions that will help them gain insight into each other’s histories, interests, and hopes. Partners might study each other’s reading logs and ask, “How much do you read at home or at school? Are there times when you read more or less? Why do you think that is?” Then, too, partners might ask, “What goals do

you have for yourself as a reader? What are you doing to meet those goals?" or, "When books tend to be a perfect fit for you, what do those books tend to be like?" Remember that the interview is a time to listen and to learn, to get to know your partner much like you know your best friend. Therefore, it will be critical for your readers to listen intently, to let the person being interviewed lead, and to ask follow-up questions when they wish to gather more information. Children might jot notes on the important things they learn about their partners so that they can hold onto and refer to that information in future meetings.

With a strong relationship established, partners will begin talking about books that they are reading. You will want to teach children that partners often begin their conversations by telling each other what happened in the book they read. This helps partners to catch up—because they have not been reading the same book, they have also not shared the same experience that day. Then partners may share how they felt and what they thought about the events in the text, pushing their thinking about their reading.

When emphasizing retelling, remember that this level of comprehension is *necessary* but absolutely *not sufficient* for success in reading. Most children who struggle on state tests are readers who read too slowly, children who keep their noses so close to the ground that they can only retell in a very literal, bit-by-bit fashion, often without even grasping the sequence of the whole story line. Therefore, you may teach children that readers use retelling to help us grasp the whole of the story, to see the big picture of the story. The Common Core State Standards note that third graders should describe and explain both what the characters are like and how that contributes to the story. It also states that students should be able to recount the lesson of the story using key details from the text.

One way you might teach children to retell is this: start at the beginning of the story and take big steps through the time line of events, telling only the key parts of the text. That is, readers step over the details and small events, and touch down on the big, important events. So, if you are retelling *Stone Fox*, you might say: "Willy and his dog, Searchlight, can't wake up Grandfather. Willy gets Doc Smith, who tells him his grandfather is depressed. Willy finds out his grandfather owes a lot of money in taxes. Willy and Searchlight enter a sled dog race to try to win the prize money to save the farm and his grandfather."

Then, too, you might teach children to conduct "synthesized retellings," in which we start retelling the section we read last and then reference prior parts of the text to synthesize all the pertinent information we have read. You might say: "Readers, at times we start retelling at the beginning. At other times, we start retelling the part of the book we just finished reading. When we do this second kind of retelling, readers start out only retelling the section we just finished reading. Whenever our retelling gets to a part that has meaning that comes from earlier in the story, we add a reference to that earlier bit into our retelling to bring in the relevant background. So, as you go through the retelling, you pull together all the big important parts of the story."

You will want to emphasize to children that when making a reference to prior text, readers speak parenthetically. We want our partners and ourselves to know which

information came first. So, if you are demonstrating a synthesis retelling with *Stone Fox*, you might say, “In Chapter 8, Willy rode his sled to the edge of the town on the day of the race. He stopped—amazed to see so many spectators. (This is the race he entered so he could get money to save the farm from tax collectors and his grandfather from depression.) Willy saw that one of the people who had come to cheer him on was Doc Smith. (Doc Smith is the person who told Willy he was nuts to try to find a way to help his grandfather pay the tax money.)” Of course, as you do this, you will want to alter your voice so that they can hear the parenthetical comments and throw your arm backward to emphasize that you are accessing information from earlier sections. Then, too, you will want to be sure to highlight that when doing this kind of retelling, readers constantly go back and forth between the past and the present. That is, there is not one reference to prior text, but multiple references to critical information from earlier sections. After all, we do this work to make meaning of the whole book, not only that one chapter.

As children grow stronger at retelling, you will see partner talk grow stronger as well, because both the reader and the partner will have a strong understanding of the text and will be able to more deeply discuss their thoughts and feelings about that text. To support this work further, you will want to teach children to listen well. That is, you will want to teach them to be still when someone is speaking, to allow time for partners to share all thoughts, to nod their heads to show they understand, and to ask questions when they are confused. It can be helpful for children to see this in action, and so you will likely want to demonstrate this for the class. You can select a child to be your partner and model listening to him as he speaks in front of the class. Then, partners can practice what they have seen you do in both the lesson and their conversation that day and in future days.

## Celebration

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You will want to end by celebrating the rich work your children did across the month, helping them to savor all they have experienced and take ownership of all they have learned. Your aim during the celebration will be to invite children to pack their identity kits and their strategy toolkits so that they go forward into the upcoming unit with a sense of personal agency, convinced that they can author reading lives that matter. Teach children to think back on the unit, recalling memories that they want to hold onto forever. Children can look back through logs and Post-its and think back on the read-aloud, their conversations with partners, and their independent reading books. Then, they can talk with a partner, discussing how they have changed and what they want to remember as they continue to read. Then too, they might think about the big discoveries they made about themselves as they read during this unit. After a few minutes of discussion, children can write down what they want to hold onto, recording their memories and hopes on paper so they are not fleeting. You might choose to have children share what they wrote as a class to end the celebration.

## Additional Resources

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The biggest work, the work that unites and underlines everything you will do as a teacher of reading in this upcoming year, is to help all your students become avid readers. Remember that the end-of-the-year benchmark for second grade is level M, meaning that even with a little bit of slide over the summer, your new third graders will come to you ready to read books like *Poppleton*, *Magic Tree House*, and *Jigsaw Jones*. Of course, there may be a number of children who actually come back to school ready to read even harder books—perhaps they read during the summer, or attended a summer program, or simply grew in age and maturity. We invite you to adapt some of the teaching points below by referring to later units of study to find strategies for children doing work at higher levels.

On the other hand, if you have had a chance to look over your children’s reading levels from second grade, and you know that you have a large number of students who ended second grade reading at levels H–K or below, you will need to make plans for doing some intense catch-up work. You will need to match kids to books as best you can until you’ve had a chance to conduct formal running records so that you can begin supporting readers through book introductions, coaching, guided reading, and small-group work. The sooner you begin this work, the better. You may need to revisit some of the teaching points from last year’s second-grade units, maybe even borrowing some of the charts from second-grade classrooms if you can, to help kids remember all of the great work they did at the end of last year.

If you are concerned about your children’s reading levels, you might want to do extra read-alouds, perhaps two or three sessions each day instead of one, highlighting strategies like predicting and then revising or confirming predictions, stopping and thinking as you read, retelling important parts of the text, thinking about character motivations and how characters react to problems. You may want to use shared reading to model how readers use a combination of strategies for figuring out unfamiliar words, never relying on just one, and model strategies for reading fluently and expressively. You can then revisit those shared reading texts during reading workshop with small groups of children who need the extra support so that they can catch up. You will probably want to provide as much time as possible for independent reading, too, if you are concerned about your students’ reading levels—perhaps extend reading time by structuring your workshop so that children read as long as they can, then take five minutes to talk with partners, then return to reading independently for another stretch of time. Perhaps you’ll even provide a second time for reading each day, borrowing five to ten minutes from other parts of your day, or recruit parents or after-school care providers to ensure that extra reading is also happening outside of school.

The teaching points listed below are provided as a guide, based on the book *Building a Reading Life*, from the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading, Grades 3–5*. You may want to adapt these plans, depending on the particular needs of your own third graders. If you decide to forge your own pathway, think about how to make the parts

of your unit seem coherent and logical, so that readers feel as if they are on a path-way that will inevitably help them emerge as more powerful and independent readers and thinkers.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points:

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### Part One: Making Reading Lives

- “Readers don’t just read, we also build reading lives for ourselves. To do this, we stop to reflect, ‘When was reading the pits for me?’ and ‘When was it the best it can be?’ And then we figure out how these times can help us learn how to change our reading lives for the better.”
- “People who take care of themselves—as athletes, as musicians, and as readers, too—know that it is important to sometimes stop and say, ‘From today on, I’m going to . . .’ and then we name our hope, our promise, our New SchoolYear’s resolution. After that, we try to let it change how we live in the future.”
- “Reading researchers have found that all of us need tons and tons of ‘high success’ reading in order to grow as readers. We need tons of time to read when we are not fussing over hard words, when we are not stopping and starting and stopping again, when we don’t need to furrow our foreheads. We need lots of mind-on-the-story reading. Today I want to teach you to recognize the kinds of books that are at our own personal level—ones we can read smoothly, with accuracy and comprehension.”
- “Today I’m going to teach you a few tips that you can use to become readers who read faster, stronger, and longer. Readers take off the brakes as we read, picking up our reading pace a bit at times, so we can take in what we are reading more fully—both the details and the whole.”
- “We need to guard against just whipping through the words, reading on auto-pilot. Instead, we need to pay attention, making sure we are reading in such a way that we let the words matter.”

### Part Two: Making Texts Matter

- “Readers sometimes pause when we become confused in the text we’re reading. We’ll be reading along and then the text turns a corner and suddenly we’re not quite sure what’s going on. It’s as if the film breaks in the mental movie we’re

making. When that happens, readers say, ‘Huh?’ and we continue reading, asking, ‘What’s going on?’ The details sometimes help, and sometimes we need to reread.”

- “Readers must choose what our relationship toward books will be. We can be a curmudgeon toward books, or we can let books matter to us, reading them like they’re gold.”
- “Strong readers create a buzz about books we love. To do this, it helps to tell others the sort of readers who will like a book, to summarize the book, to read a little bit aloud to those others, and above all, to tell them why the book is special.”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers make sure we always have a stack of books beside us—and that the books are ones that can turn us into the readers we want to be. To find books that are just right for us, we need systems that can help us find those books.”
- “Today I want to teach you that the best readers are like the monster tractors that climb over the hurdle of the hard word and read on, never taking a detour from the trail of the story.”

### **Part Three: Bringing Together Reading Lives, Texts that Matter, and Partners**

- “Today I want to teach you that having a reading companion makes all the difference in the world. And reading friendships start with people getting to know each other in a special way—as readers. We pay attention to each other’s reading histories, reading interests, reading hopes—and by doing so, we stand a chance of being a force for the good in another reader’s efforts to author a reading life for himself, for herself.”
- “You know what, readers? I’m realizing now that reading a book is a lot like going to the movies—a lot of the fun part comes after reading time is over, when you get to talk about what you’ve read.”
- “Readers often retell our books (up to the part where we’re reading) as a way to lay the story out for others so we can talk it over. But we also retell our books as a way to lay the story out for ourselves so we can think it over. And that process of retelling and rethinking keeps the whole story primed in our minds.”

- “I call this third kind of retelling (and of recalling) a ‘synthesis retelling,’ because although you start out just retelling the section you just finished reading, whenever your retelling gets to a part that has meaning from earlier in the story, you add a reference to the earlier bit into your retelling, almost using parentheses to bring in the relevant background. So as you proceed through the retelling, you have to synthesize, fit together, all the parts you’ve read that are pertinent.”
  
- “When we are reading and also when we are listening to other readers’ ideas, we need to make sure that we’re listening with our minds and hearts open. We don’t want to listen like curmudgeons. We want to listen reminding ourselves that there are deeply brilliant ideas about to be made, ones that just need a little listening to grow.”



## UNIT TWO

# Following Characters into Meaning

*Envision, Predict, Synthesize, and Infer*

**OCTOBER**

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: M/N)

Whereas September put a spotlight on helping children author independent reading lives, this unit will inspire readers to think deeply about and to learn from their characters. During the first portion of the unit, you will invite readers to dive headfirst into the worlds of the books they are reading—and to do so wearing the shoes of the characters who inhabit those worlds. Living as their characters, readers will develop their skills at predicting, envisioning, and reading with fluency—and you’ll develop skills at interpreting assessment data to understand where each reader is in a pathway of skill development. You’ll also develop skills at administering performance assessments and gathering feedback that helps move students along that pathway. In the next portion of the unit, you will help readers notice characters’ personality quirks and habits; you’ll also help readers infer to develop ideas about character traits, motivations, troubles, and actions. By encouraging readers to think deeply—and with nuance—about characters, by teaching readers to consider what a character holds close, to consider a character’s complexities, to consider the way that secondary characters act as mirrors of main characters, you’ll be teaching inference. You’ll also be helping students develop their abilities to talk and to write well about reading. The final portion of the unit focuses on the lessons readers learn alongside characters, and on how we can apply those lessons to our own lives.

Before plunging into this teaching, you will want to think about whether you have time for all three of these portions of the unit. Readers can think about characters while reading any kind of fiction book, so you will not need to draw upon a special collection of books for this unit. This means you presumably have the books that would be required for readers to remain in the unit for six weeks rather than the usual four. You may, therefore,

decide to teach this entire unit sequence and devote more time than usual to the unit. Then again, your colleagues in the preceding grades may have taught the first two portions of the unit. If that is the case, you may decide to teach a condensed version of the first portion of the unit, and to do some performance assessment work to determine which aspects of the second portion of the unit will be supportive for your readers, and to then focus more on the third (and presumably new) portion of the unit. We do not recommend, however, that you bypass the first two sections of the unit altogether. Because the first part of the unit helps readers approach character study with empathy (walking in the shoes of a character, seeing through a character's eyes, predicting a character's next steps), while the second and third parts channel readers to approach texts as researchers might (pulling back to develop a bird's-eye view of a text, gleaning facts and insights about characters, and synthesizing this information into evidence-based theories that can apply across books), the arc of the unit is important. Your goal, by the end of the unit, will be for readers to move fluidly between nose-in-the-book, totally engaged, aesthetic reading and the more "professorial," analytic reading.

The first two parts of this unit are detailed in the book *Following Characters into Meaning* in the series *Units of Study for Teaching Reading: A Curriculum for the Reading Workshop*. The third part relies on the final portion of the unit, *Bringing Characters to Life and Developing Essential Reading Skills*, in *Constructing Curriculum*, another book in the *Units of Study* series. We made this decision, in part, to differentiate this third-grade character unit of study from the fourth- and fifth-grade units, and in part to align the work children will be doing with the Common Core State Standards for third graders, which states students must be able to show a steadily growing ability to discern more from and make fuller use of texts, including making an increasing number of connections among ideas and between texts, considering a wider range of textual evidence, and becoming more sensitive to inconsistencies, ambiguities, and poor reasoning in texts.

This unit is designed so that it has the following parts:

Part One: Walking in a Character's Shoes: Envisionment and Prediction

Part Two: Building Theories about Characters

Part Three: Growing and Learning Lessons alongside Characters

You'll notice that Kate DiCamillo's novel, *Because of Winn-Dixie*, is woven throughout this write-up. It is also the touchstone text in the character unit of study in *Constructing Curriculum*. We are fans of Kate's books and of that one in particular for third graders, but of course, you could choose to read a different read-aloud for the unit's touchstone text.

## Rally Your Children around This Year's New Goals

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At the start of any unit, it is important to clarify the unit's reading goals. Children will hear that this is a unit about "characters," and that topic will be so concrete and clear to them that they'll be ready to get started, no question. You, on the other hand, will probably

want to think more about the focus of the unit, because although characters are crucial in any story, there is no reading skill called “characters.” The *children* will think this is simply a unit on characters, but *you* will know that this is a unit on a set of reading skills that you’ll bring forth as children read fiction, thinking and caring about characters. And those skills can be chosen by you, the teacher. In this write-up and in the character units of study books, we support you in the teaching of the interrelated skills of envisionment, prediction, inference, and interpretation.

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

## Sustaining Previous Work as You Continue to Teach

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Meanwhile, although you will rally children to do *new* work, you’ll also need to remind them to continue doing all you have already taught. That is, your teaching must be cumulative. On Day Three or so of this new unit, remind children that they should be carrying all that you taught last month with them now. If you emphasized keeping daily logs, it is crucial that *you* don’t forget those logs now! If you emphasized that each child in the class make it his or her goal to author a unique reading life, and that it is important to learn from each other’s lives as readers, you will want to continue to thread that emphasis throughout this upcoming unit. The goal is that children don’t abandon reading habits or skills they acquired in Unit One as they learn new skills. Another important word of caution is this: no matter what, you will want to make sure that the work of the unit does not overwhelm children’s reading. Make sure that your children continue to actually read, eyes on print, for forty minutes each day in school and for close to that same amount of time at home.

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

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This unit is easier to provision with books than others because children can grow ideas about characters when reading any fiction book at all, so you do not need a specialized library. Although your teaching may emphasize envisionment and prediction during the first portion of the unit, close reading and inference during the second, and growing and learning lessons alongside characters in the third, throughout the whole unit children will be engaged in the crucial habit: reading, reading, and reading more fiction books. Keep in mind, the number of books you’d expect children to read in a week is different

according to the levels of the books in their hands. For example, readers in level K should be reading eight to ten books per week, while readers in levels L/M, four to six per week, and in N/O/P/Q, two to four per week. Either way, they'll be reading a lot—and this matters more than anything else in this curricular calendar.

You will want to think not just about the texts you provide to children, but also how you will structure their book talks. Depending on the availability of books in your classroom library, you might ask partners to read the same books, or, alternatively, you might ask them to read different books that they swap upon completion. If partners are reading about a common character, they may be able to push their conversation deeper, focusing on that shared character. This sort of conversation might invite readers to deepen their understanding of who the character is and what he or she might do next. This conversation might invite readers to reflect upon how a character responds to changing situations, learns lessons, and grows. This work supports the speaking and listening standard for third graders outlined by the Common Core State Standards: “[T]o build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must have ample opportunities to take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations—as part of a whole class, in small groups, and with a partner. Being productive members of these conversations requires that students contribute accurate, relevant information; respond to and develop what others have said; make comparisons and contrasts; and analyze and synthesize a multitude of ideas in various domains.”

To scaffold student talk, you can teach partners to ask each other questions such as:

- “What kind of person is the character?”
- “Do you like him (or her)? Why or why not?”
- “Why did the character do that?”
- “How come the character is feeling that way?”
- “Do you think he (or she) did the right thing?”
- “What do you think will happen next?”

Notice that these questions push your children to do some of the reading skill work of the unit. They are not questions that can be answered with one word, nor can they be addressed merely through a retelling of the story. These questions are designed to push readers to express what we think about the text and about the characters, to predict and to theorize.

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

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

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

By offering children these prompts, we are teaching them to ratchet up the level of their thinking in conversations. While teaching into partnerships, you may find it helpful to reference Session VIII of *Following Characters into Meaning*. This session provides strategies for showing readers how partnerships talk. The mid-workshop teaching point helps readers to rehearse for grand conversations by going back to their jottings and thoughtfully selecting a jotting that is a thought, not a fact from the text. We know that when partnerships come together to talk about ideas, their conversations are richer and their thinking grows and changes. When done thoughtfully and openly, talk can help readers to grow more powerful and provocative ideas. In her book *The Art of Teaching Reading*, Calkins tells us that the definition of a good conversation is that your thinking grows or changes. During the character unit we must seize teaching opportunities to show children the power of talk. Note that these partnership moves directly support the Common Core State Standards emphasis that third graders ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text.

Whole-class conversations are also a wonderful way to support children’s partner conversations. You can provide high amounts of scaffolding, and with this help children can grow a conversation by sticking to an idea or two of importance. This means that when you finish reading aloud a chapter, you may want to ask, “Can someone get us started in a conversation about this chapter?” Teach readers that great book talks begin with ideas that are central to the text and provocative enough to merit conversation. Once a child makes a comment, give everyone time to mull over that comment for a moment, and even to look at the text or jot notes. Then you might ask, “Who can talk back to this idea?” Readers can then try sticking to that idea, using evidence from the text to support their thinking. Coach them to listen and then talk back to each other.

Make sure that your kids are not just supported by good talk, but that they are also doing this work in texts that are appropriate to their reading level. 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 already. Some of them will have entered the year rusty from a summer without reading, and after just a few weeks of reading up a storm, 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 making those books be more challenging, for those who are ready. You needn’t do fancy 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 to determine comprehension. If their speed at moving through books has increased, that too can be sign they're ready to move up. You will probably want to put readers into "transitional baggies" containing some of the easier books at the text level, and then you will want to provide extra support in those harder books. Same-book partnerships help, as does a book introduction. If you or a parent can read some chapters aloud to the reader, this too offers help. Series books are especially good for supporting readers as they move to harder levels. If you see some children who are not ready to move toward transitional baggies, then this should be a sign that they need some extra teaching and extra guidance. It is likely that as you enter this unit, more children will be in transitional baggies than not. You can do some whole-class or small-group work on supporting oneself in harder books, and talk up the purposeful goal-driven stance that can support acceleration.

## Read Aloud to Support Envisionment and Prediction

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Because it is essential that stories ignite a vital sort of imagination—one that allows readers to live inside the world of the story, to identify with the characters, seeing and sensing situations from inside the characters' minds—the first portion of the unit highlights personal response, envisionment, and empathy in ways that strengthen that connection between readers and characters. During the first portion of the unit, then, you'll teach toward that lost-in-a-book feeling that comes when one identifies with the protagonist in a good story. The easiest way to guide children into the feeling of being caught up in the story is to read aloud an absorbing chapter book, helping children imagine the world of the story and identify with the main character.

During the preceding unit, you will have demonstrated and supported that lost-in-the-book work by encouraging empathy with characters during the read-aloud, and now you'll continue and extend this work, again reading aloud an enthralling text. You'll pause in the midst of read-aloud to say, "I can see it, can't you?" and then verbally paint a picture that is drawn from earlier information in the text, from identifications with characters, and from your own life experiences. As suggested by the Common Core State Standards, you might also want to address illustrations in the book, discussing how they are adding to your understanding of the mood, character, and setting. Another time you might look up from the text and say, "I'm trying to imagine in my mind what this looks like. I've never been to this school, but I'm kind of picturing it is like our school—red brick, three stories tall—I'll read on and see." As you read on in the story about the school, it's likely that new information in the text will lead you to revise your initial mental pictures. "Oh, now I realize it's a *white clapboard* schoolhouse! And I'm getting the idea it's much smaller than our school, because . . ." You'll want to point out the ways in which close reading informs our mental pictures, helping us continually revise those pictures in light of new information. Often when we read on, the story provides details that nudge us to say, "Oops, I'll have to change what I'm thinking." The Common Core State

Standards note that third graders should describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events. The point, of course, is not only to help readers picture the text, almost as if it was the 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 she's feeling right now? Turn and talk," or "I'm worried about her. Aren't you? Turn and tell your partner about your worries." Or you may say: "Show me on your faces what Opal is feeling *now*," or, a bit later, "Use your body to show me what's happening to Opal *now*. Things are changing, aren't they?"

## Part One: Walking in a Character's Shoes: Envisionment and Prediction

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Of course, the goal is not only for children to envision and lose themselves in the books that *you* read aloud. The goal is also for children to do this for *themselves* when they read. You'll want to teach children to envision by every means possible. During independent reading and partner reading, you'll probably encourage children to develop their mental pictures through discussion. Prompt kids to ask each other: "What do the places in the book look like?" and "What has the reader seen before that can help him or her picture the character, the character's home, or the locale in which the book is situated?" You might also encourage a reader to quickly sketch a character or a setting as he or she reads, and then in his or her partnership conversation, to talk through the reasons for this particular image. They might ask: "What's going on around the character?" and "How is your character standing or moving in this scene? What do you see his face looking like in this moment?" and "Who else is there? What's the scene like?" The reader's job is to draw on all we have read and then guess—imagining as best we are able.

Although talking, sketching, and writing are all wonderful scaffolds for readers in envisionment, many teachers have found that allowing kids to quite literally step into their characters' shoes is a way to promote even more thoughtful understanding of their characters. Incorporating improvisational drama, both into read-alouds and partner work, is another way for children to envision their stories. Session II of *Following Characters into Meaning* describes the thin line between reading and drama. In classrooms that piloted these books last fall, again and again we saw children become more engaged and thoughtful as they went from reading to acting out small sections of texts and then back to reading. This informed not only their partnership talk, but also their independent reading and jotting.

If you incorporate drama into your read-aloud, you might pause, and, instead of conducting a turn and talk, you might say: "Partner A, be Opal standing in front of the preacher, trying to convince him to let her keep Winn-Dixie. How do you feel, as Opal? Are you using the scraggly dog next to you to plead your case? Where are you looking? What's your body doing? And Partner B, you be the preacher, ready to say no to your daughter. What do you look like? How are you holding your body? What expression is on your face?"

With your support, children will find what strategies work best for them. As they come to understand how they envision best, you might want to encourage them to return to passages that matter in a text, rereading those, pushing themselves to envision. You may suggest that they reread, almost acting each scene out. Alternatively, you could suggest a child try little bits of fast writing. You could say: “Sometimes it helps to use writing to get us pretending we are the characters in a story we are reading. Try it, for just a second. What are you thinking right now? Jot your thoughts.”

At this point in the unit, you’ll want to teach prediction with the same gusto you taught with envisionment. You’ll want to clarify in your mind what skilled predictors do so that you can lay out a learning pathway for readers. Then, you will want to conduct informal assessments to help you determine students’ proficiency with prediction. If you have a clear goal of how students should predict, you will be able create a plan to help readers develop their current predicting proficiencies. You will also want to be mindful of kids’ current reading levels. Children who are reading texts at level K/L/M can predict by relying on knowledge of simple, straightforward story structure. A character has a problem and tries, tries, tries to resolve that problem. Readers who are working with texts at level U/V/W will need to do quite different work as they predict, asking themselves, “How might all the subplots come together into something cohesive at the end? Which characters that seemed minor or subplots that seemed tangential at first might return to bring this story toward its conclusion?”

You may want to turn to Session VI of *Following Characters into Meaning*. This session explains how readers can deepen their prediction work when they push themselves to see not just what the character will do next, or what is yet to happen, but also *how* those events might unfold. Will the shy boy take small steps toward his dream of starring in a school play—even if doing so means risking embarrassment? Will the girl who longs to be accepted by a particular clique begin dressing in different clothes, talking in new ways, disowning friends that the group dislikes—all in the hopes of being accepted? This sort of prediction work is essential to learning how to read books and characters with an eye toward complexity. People, and characters too, don’t just do one thing, then another, then another in an automated way. There are reasons behind their motivations and actions, and, usually, these are linked to who they are as people. Readers who can anticipate what a character will do next, and how, have a deeper understanding of that character. Some of your more advanced readers will also draw on their sense of the lessons a character has learned or is in the process of learning, or has yet to learn, to predict next steps. You might want to teach readers that they can make predictions too, by building not only on their sense of how stories tend to go, but also on how this particular story line is unfolding. At the same time, you’ll teach children that readers read expecting to be surprised, knowing that they will sometimes have to revise their predictions—or grow new ones—based on new information they learn as they read. If children need another day of practice predicting in more detail, you might draw on Session V in *Bringing Characters to Life and Developing Essential Reading Skills in Constructing Curriculum*, which asks readers to “draw on all we know to predict in graphic detail.”

## Part Two: Building Theories about Characters

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During the second part of this unit, you'll shift your emphasis and teach readers to read closely, inferring to grow theories about the character, and then reading with those theories in hand, altering them according to new information. The Common Core State Standards suggest that readers develop theories by describing how new information builds on earlier parts of the book. This synthesis is precisely what your readers will be doing as they read closely to gather evidence about their characters to support their burgeoning theories.

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

Once readers begin building theories based on noticing character actions, emphasize that readers pay attention not only to *what* a character does but also to *how* the character does these things. Does the text give any clues about the character's gestures? About the way a character walks or sits or closes the door? So, too, you might want to teach children to consider why a character acts in a certain way. If the text says that a character slumps in the chair, then the reader needs to not just see that in her mind but ask, "Why does she sit like that? Is she tired? Bored? What's going on?"

Readers also pay attention to the way characters talk and the words they choose, their tone of voice, and the emotional cues the author adds to dialogue. All of these give hints about what kind of people live in the world of a story. Considering what a character is thinking can also help understand a character. You might want to teach kids that sometimes the author offers windows into a character's mind by including passages that show thinking or an explanation of a character's motives.

These strategies may sound fairly straightforward, but children often struggle trying to do this work. Many children need to be taught that readers glean information about a character not only from passages pertaining directly to that character, but also from many other passages—those telling about the character's home, for example, or the character's family. "Let's read this story together and think, 'Which part tells me something about Rob?'" you might ask, and then proceed to show that passages describing Rob's home provide windows into his character.

As children come to understand more about the characters in their books, they may notice that a character acts in a surprising or inconsistent manner. Teach kids that characters are complicated—they are not just one way. Then, too, teach children that characters change. Readers may read across a text, asking themselves, “Do these new sections of the text confirm or challenge my ideas about the character?” You will also likely teach children to think between several related sections of a text—readers may look at one passage at the beginning of a text, one at the middle, and one at the end. Then teach kids to talk and think specifically about a character’s evolution across the story line. Children tend to rely on sweeping generalizations when talking about the ways a character changes or the lessons a character learns, but your goal is to teach children to grow grounded, accountable, and precise ideas. We can teach children to think precisely in part by teaching them to reflect on when a character acts out of character, asking ourselves, “I wonder why the author might have made the decision to have the character do this?” and then trying to answer that question with some specificity.

You’ll also want to teach kids that readers use our knowledge of how stories tend to go to remind us of what’s worth noticing in a story, and to inform our thinking about character change. In literature, stories are often built around a central structure in which a main character faces challenges, some explicit and some more nebulous. A character draws on what’s inside herself to meet these challenges and often changes in the process, developing inner resources. Often not only the main character changes in this process, but also other characters change, too. In doing this thinking work, readers come to realize that events in stories are consequential—the choices made by one character affect others, and single events often have significant impact on other events.

As children come to think about characters with an eye toward complexity, you’ll teach them that the story will *tell* specific actions, and that from those, readers can *infer* specific meaning. If the story says that Robert started his essay five times, each time crumpling his discarded lead into a wad, then the author is expecting that the reader will infer meaning about this character. The author does not need to come right out and say “Robert is a perfectionist.” The reader may not find descriptive words in the text but must, instead, bring those precise words to the text.

By reaching for a precise word to describe a character, for example, children are able to convey their ideas about that character with greater accuracy, which in turn allows them to speak with real insight and greater empathy. Many children will reach first for generic terms: A character is *nice*, *mean*, or *good*. You may find it helpful to create a literary word chart so that children realize that a *nice* character might be *generous*, *encouraging*, *loyal*, or *patient*. A *mean* character, on the other hand, might be *intolerant*, *snide*, *jealous*, or even *malicious*. Some teachers have their kids rate the synonyms for *nice* along a gradient of niceness, so as to begin to grasp the nuances of each synonym.

Once children have developed a theory or multiple theories, teach them to read on, expecting that these will become more complex (which generally means longer, with qualifiers added) or that they will change. It’s crucial to teach children to revise their initial ideas in light of new information. Children who are reading the beginning of *Because of Winn-Dixie* might be tempted to describe Opal as *outgoing*—or the generic *nice*. Once

they read a bit further, however, and push themselves to reach for more precise language to describe Opal, they may find themselves saying that she is “open to new people” or “bubbly and open” or “charming and charismatic,” but that she is also “deeply hurt” or “heartbroken” or “struggling to let go.” Precise language also allows children to think with nuance and to read with more alertness to language and to their own thinking about stories. This is critical to helping children become more flexible and complex readers.

As you help young readers grow ideas about characters, you will also want to consider your understanding of bands of text difficulty. For example, readers who are working with K/L/M texts will probably find that those texts feature one or two main characters, each of whom is characterized by a couple of dominant character traits, which are usually very much related to the story line. For example, in the series *Poppleton* (a text recommended in the appendix of the Common Core State Standards), Cherry Sue is overly friendly and generous, and Poppleton eventually decides he’s had enough of her generosity and wants a bit of space from her. It will not require a lot of inference for readers of these texts to deduce what their characters are like. These characters won’t tend to change, either, although their feelings will. Meanwhile, once readers are reading texts in the N/Q band of text difficulty, characters will be more ambivalent. They’ll feel two, or maybe more, contradictory things at once. At this band of text difficulty, it is common for a character to change at the end of the story.

As children read, growing ideas about their characters, they will do well to take good notes. When you teach children to think about the protagonist’s traits, motivations, problems (or struggles), lessons, and changes, suggest that they keep Post-its (and perhaps “theory charts”) as they read, and suggest also that they meet for five minutes with a partner at the end of every reading workshop to “talk off their Post-its.” If children are accustomed to working with “boxes-and-bullets” (see *Breathing Life into Essays* in the series *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5*), you might help them jot main ideas in a boxes-and-bullets form as they prepare for partner conversations. Once they meet with a partner, teach them that one child can get the conversation started by sharing something provocative and central to the text, and then the partner can listen and extend the remark. This work supports the first Common Core State Standard, which states that readers should be able to ask and answer questions that demonstrate an understanding of a text, explicitly referring to the text as the basis for the answers. At this point, readers will benefit from a reminder to refer once again to the talking prompts they used to grow ideas earlier in the unit. You will want to encourage partners to “talk long” about one idea because what they are doing as they extend a conversation is learning to think in some depth.

Some children may struggle to consistently produce Post-its that will provide a good launching point for conversation. You might teach them to do something as simple as starring the Post-its they think were particularly good, and then teach them to articulate what it was about a particular Post-it that made it good. They can use that jotting as a mentor Post-it, continuing to read with the goal of producing equally thoughtful responses to what they find in their books. By giving themselves concrete and visible goals, readers will lift the level of their thinking, growing more complex theories about their characters.

## Part Three: Growing and Learning Lessons alongside Characters

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In the final part of this unit, you'll invite children to once again step into the shoes of the characters in their books, now drawing on everything they've learned about how to "read" characters, to grow with them. When we read in this way, when we care about characters, when we are invested in their stories, we learn important life lessons and stretch our thinking in big ways. It isn't just Opal who learns to let her mother go and to open herself up to new relationships. Reading her story, stepping into her shoes, *we too* might think, "There's someone in my life, as well, that I've had to—or will have to—find a way to say goodbye to," or "I wonder whether it would help to open myself up more to this person in my life." That is, you'll teach children that a good book gives us ways to grow in our own lives, long after we shut its pages.

In particular, you'll teach children to pay attention to moments when characters face big obstacles, or when characters are forced to make a decision, to take action. You'll also teach children to pay attention to when they begin to resolve their problems. In those moments lie big lessons—not only for characters, but for us, too. You'll notice that this part is aligned with the Common Core State Standards, which expect third-grade readers to determine the central message, lesson, or moral of a story, and to explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.

You might begin this part teaching children that when we come to a part of the story that makes our hearts race, we know these are apt to be turning points and we expect that our characters will face a test. Often in moments like these—when the action speeds up and we sit on the edge of our seat, worrying, hoping, cheering—the character is facing something big, the outcome of which will have big consequences. It could be that the character is physically tested, as is Little Willy during the dogsled race in *Stone Fox*, or the test may be an emotional one, as is the case for Opal, when Winn-Dixie goes missing and she is forced to think about what it might mean to lose not only her new companion for good, but her mother, too. You'll want children to think about what's at stake in moments when their hearts race—what does a character stand to lose or to gain? This will naturally lead them to think about times when their own hearts have raced—times when they've had to make decisions or been tested in some way—and to reflect on how they reacted and what they learned during those episodes.

As the unit progresses, think about ways you can teach children to deepen their understanding of character and, simultaneously, their understanding of themselves. One way to do this is to challenge the notion that in books, and in life, the things we learn are things we don't already have within us. Put another way, you might teach children that when characters set about solving their problems, often they (and we too) discover that in fact they already have what it takes to solve these themselves. Characters may not know they have what it takes, so the discovery that they have within them the strength to stand up for something in which they believe, or to perform on stage or participate in a competition, is the learning itself. You might show students that it may be "because of Winn-Dixie" that Opal forges initial acquaintances in her new town, but it's her own ability to connect with people—in particular, unusual

folks that have been living a bit on the outside themselves—to bring people together, that sets her on the path to making new friends and healing old hurts. We learn from Opal that often what we need to solve our biggest challenges and to go about getting the things we most want, in fact lies somewhere within us. This is sophisticated work. Be sure that your young readers ground their thinking and examples in the text as they tackle this work, finding specific places where an author conveys to the reader a strength or understanding or ability a character already possesses—but may not yet know she possesses—as she goes about solving her problems.

Of course, the main character doesn't operate alone in books. You might teach children that secondary characters often play important roles in the lives of main characters—and are especially influential during moments when the main character is on the path to facing or tackling something big—or learning a lesson. As readers, we can think about how a particular secondary character influences or affects the main character, knowing that there are different roles these characters are apt to play. Secondary characters can pose challenges for the main character, forcing the main character to stand up for something or resolve to make a change; they can act as advisers, offering encouragement and nuggets of wisdom or saying something truthful that is difficult but necessary for the main character to hear. Sometimes secondary characters are sidekicks to the main character—they are literally side-by-side with the main character during much of the story and perhaps offer humor, a listening ear, or a new perspective. As children read, paying attention to main characters, you might ask them to think about the secondary characters in their own lives and how these people have played influential roles. Likewise, you may ask what sorts of secondary roles they themselves have played in other people's lives.

As this part nears an end, teach children that as a character resolves his or her problems, it is up to readers to reflect on the problem solving and lessons the character experiences, thinking about what has changed for the character. That is, as a character resolves a problem, readers ask what the character knows now that he or she didn't know at the start of the story. We think of the lesson our character has learned, wondering how this book might change the way we behave in our lives. Again, it's essential that children rely on the text as they think, talk, and write about this. Encourage them to cite instances in the text where they notice a character thinking something new, and then teach them to articulate how that new thinking has made a lasting impression, both on the character and on them as readers. What larger lessons are reflected in the character's changed perspective, or changed behavior?

## Additional Resources

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The first two parts of this unit are detailed in the book *Following Characters into Meaning* in the series *Units of Study for Teaching Reading: A Curriculum for the Reading Workshop, Grades 3–5*. The third part relies on the final portion of the unit, *Bringing Characters to Life and Developing Essential Reading Skills*, in *Constructing Curriculum*, another book in the *Units of Study* series. We made this decision, in part, to differentiate this third-grade

character unit of study from the fourth- and fifth-grade units, and in part to align the work children will be doing with the Common Core State Standards for third graders, which state that students must be able to show a steadily growing ability to discern more from and make fuller use of text, including making an increasing number of connections among ideas and between texts, considering a wider range of textual evidence, and becoming more sensitive to inconsistencies, ambiguities, and poor reasoning in texts. We invite you to study all of the assessment data you have available to you and make adaptations to this plan according to students' needs. This unit is divided into parts to make it easier to plan adaptations to parts of the unit, while maintaining the overall focus on studying characters. For example, you may decide to teach prediction using strategies that aren't listed below, but your students will still be studying characters.

You will probably want to take a good look at your running records and conferring notes before heading into this unit. Based on this information, you may decide to plan a string of lessons on deeper inference and interpretation work, especially if you have a particularly strong group of readers this year. If this is the case, you might refer to Part Three of Volume One in *Following Characters into Meaning*, which isn't mentioned below, or you might look to Volume Two of *Following Characters into Meaning* for even more ideas.

On the other hand, if you are concerned about your students' reading levels, or if the majority of your students seem to have trouble with inference questions, then you may want to linger a little longer in some of these lessons on envisioning, prediction, and inference. Perhaps you'll plan to return to some lessons more than once rather than teaching a completely new strategy every day. Perhaps you'll save some days for teaching repertoire lessons—lessons that explicitly teach kids to use everything you've already taught, all the time, referring to charts and other tools in the classroom that help them remember and use all of the strategies you've demonstrated.

You'll also want to check students' book logs at the start of the unit, and throughout the unit, to be sure that kids' volume is sky high. Watch out that stopping and jotting, sorting Post-its, filling out book logs, and other tools aren't eating away at actual reading time—teach kids to be efficient and selective when it comes to using these tools, so that they can read as much as possible every day.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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### **Part One: Envisionment, Prediction, and Inference (Walking in a Character's Shoes)**

- "Today I want to teach you that if we read well, we become the character in a book. We read the words and then poof! We are one of the characters in the mental movie we're making. Poof! I'm Willy, bundled up on that sled, snow flying into my eyes, my heart racing, urging Searchlight on."
- "Today I want to teach you that when we read, you and I need to be the ones to notice if we are just gazing out at the text, thinking, 'It's as pretty as a postcard.' We need to

notice times when we are reading on emotional autopilot—maybe understanding the text, but not taking it in. And we need to say, ‘Stop the car. Pause the reading.’ When we read, we need to see not just words, but also the world of the story through the eyes of the character. There is a rap on the door, and we hear it. Even before the character calls, ‘Come in,’ we practically call out a greeting ourselves.”

- “Today I want to teach you that when we read ourselves awake, really envisioning what’s happening in the story so that we are almost in the character’s shoes, we often find ourselves remembering times in our lives when we lived through something similar, and we then bring feelings and insights from those experiences to bear on our understanding of whatever we are reading.”
- “Today I want to teach you that a reader not only sees, hears, and imagines as if in the story, making a movie in the mind. A reader also revises that mental movie. Often when we read on, the story provides details that nudge us to say, ‘Oops, I’ll have to change what I’m thinking.’”
- “Today I want to teach you that one way readers read actively and wisely, then, is by empathizing with the main character; we feel with the main character, in a way that leads us to anticipate what the character will do next.”
- “Today I want to teach you that to predict well, it helps to make a movie in your mind of what has yet to happen. Those movies need to show not only what will happen next, but also how it will happen. We can anticipate how things will happen by remembering what we already know of our characters.”
- “Today I want to teach you that when you read in such a way that you are connected with a character, when you open your heart to him or her and care the same way you would about a friend, then envisioning, predicting, and thinking about a character happen all at once, in a whoosh.”

## **Part Two: Building Theories, Gathering Evidence**

- “Today I want to teach you that 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.”
- “Researchers have found that some people are good at reading people, and those who can read people in real life can also read people in stories. Today I want to teach you that to read people—in life and in stories—it is important to remember that actions can be windows to the person. In life and as we read, we can pause

after a character has done something and say, “Let me use what just happened as a window to help me understand this person.”

- “It is important to keep in mind that characters are complicated; they are not just one way. And here’s a key point: to grow nuanced and complex ideas about characters it helps to think deeply about times when a person seems to act out of character.”
- “Today I want to teach you that paying attention to the objects that a character keeps near and dear is one way to grow ideas about what kind of person that character is. Those objects are often windows into the minds and hearts of our characters. The possessions that a character keeps close almost always reveal something important about the person.”
- “Today I want to teach you that when readers want to think deeply about a character, we examine the ways that people around the character treat that person, 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 character and voice and body language other people assume when talking to the character.”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers sharpen our ideas about characters by using precise language to describe them and their actions.”

### **Part Three: Readers Grow alongside Characters (from *Bringing Characters to Life and Developing Essential Reading Skills in Constructing Curriculum—Alternate Units of Study*)**

- “Today I want to teach you that when readers come to a part of the story that makes our hearts race, we know these are apt to be turning points, and we expect that our characters will face a test.”
- “Today I want to teach you that as we think about and discuss ways that a character might solve the problems in his life, often we discover that the character already has what it takes to solve these himself.”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers take note of secondary characters in the story. We think about how a particular secondary character influences or affects the main character, knowing that there are different sorts of roles these characters are apt to play.”
- “Today I want to teach you that as a character resolves a problem, we ask what the character knows now that he or she didn’t know at the start of the story. We think of the lesson our character has learned, wondering how this book might change the way we behave in our own lives.”



## UNIT THREE

# Series Book Clubs

**NOVEMBER**

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: N)

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### An Introduction to the Unit

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Think back over your own reading life and you will probably remember a time when you were an avid series book reader. *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, *Ramona Quimby*, *Shiloh*, *Poppy*, *Henry and Mudge* (all recommended by the Common Core State Standards)—the list of engaging series books and characters goes on and on. Year after year, children get hooked into reading—and into reading a lot—by reading series books. This unit will take advantage of that natural draw and support students' reading with volume, at the same time that it pushes them to deeper comprehension, particularly around characters.

At this point in the year, many kids in third grade are at a turning point in their reading lives: they are often moving into texts that are increasingly complex (levels N–P), with characters who are more complicated and offer more occasions for nuanced thinking and response. Because series books tend to use characters to hook kids, this is a perfect opportunity to up the ante of character work, knowing that this higher-level thinking is both available and necessary in harder books, and trusting that kids will have ample opportunity to practice this work as they read across a series. In the second part of this unit, you will have an opportunity to teach toward more interpretive thinking than what your readers were practicing in October, perhaps drawing on the second volume of *Following Characters into Meaning* from the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*.

At the same time that you are helping kids reach for higher text levels, you can trust that the structure of a series will also serve as a scaffold—so now is a good time to think about teaching ways that series books are also more complex than they may seem

on the surface—for those kids who are ready. Series books are especially good for supporting readers as they move to harder levels. If you see some children who are not ready to move, then this should be a sign that they need some extra teaching and extra guidance. Your hope is that your readers will become fans of Hank Zipzer, Amber Brown, Horrible Harry, Willimena, or Horrid Henry. As children come to know a series, they fall in love with the characters and they are eager to read the next book because they won't want to part with their newfound friends. Series books repeat characters and settings, and their plot lines are often formulaic. Readers will eventually pick up the pattern of how a book within a single series “tends to go.” So, although you are teaching your kids how to move across a series, you know that, really, you are teaching the predictable structure and volume of that series to move them into more sophisticated reading habits. The unit naturally aligns itself, then, with the Common Core State Standards, which expect that readers are able to compare and contrast the themes, settings, and plots of stories written by the same author about the same or similar characters. Part Three of this unit is dedicated to this work.

You may find that, as your kids are learning to think deeply about the characters in their series books, they are also developing a sense of an author's style. The Common Core State Standards call for an awareness of author's craft, and this unit would be a natural place to plant the seed in kids' minds that, as readers, we can be thinking like writers and noticing how the author of our series tends to build tension, make us care for the characters, or wrap things up at the end of a book. You can certainly support children to meet the third-grade standard in this category, which expects readers to be able to “describe how each successive part [of a piece of literature] builds on earlier sections.”

This year's write-up of this unit diverges from series units in years past, in that we are angling toward these new, more ambitious standards which, as Norman Webb says in “Depth of Knowledge,” require complex reasoning and synthesizing skills. Right from the start, then, you will want to think about where your kids are, and how you can use series books to engage and delight them, but also entice them into new and more analytic ways of engaging with literature.

## Preparing Your Classroom Library

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Before you begin this unit of study, prepare your classroom library for the unit by rounding up whatever series books you can find and organizing them by series. In series books that are leveled N and above, it is generally helpful for students to progress through the books in order, if possible. (The easier series books are less apt to be organized so that one book builds upon the previous ones.) As one reads across the books that are leveled N and above, most of the characters do change, and the problems set up in the first book are often carried over and evolve in the second and third book. For example, the relationship between Peter and Fudge and the problems that Fudge creates are set up in *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, but the characters and problems grow and change across the series. In this unit, then, it will be helpful if you not only collect books within

a series in a big bin, but that you also sequence these in order and set students up to read through the series sequentially, synthesizing a new text with the earlier ones, tracking the problems the characters face and the changes they experience.

In addition, in some cases, the levels of the books change across a series. For example, books within *The Dragon Slayer's Academy* (N–P) and the *Amber Brown* series (N–O) each span several levels. In all those instances, the first books are easier—although of course they are also challenging because the series itself will be new to that reader. Therefore, it is helpful to try to organize your series books so that students at least have the first two books in the series and, if possible, begin by reading those books. Of course, you will no doubt have some gaps in every series. You may want to see if colleagues in the school are willing to combine forces, or you may take a trip to the library.

The problem of accessing books will compound if you make the decision, advocated below, to use this unit as the launch for book clubs. This means you'll need not just a run of books from a series, but multiple copies of these! By all means, refer to [BooksSource.com](http://BooksSource.com) if you will be purchasing new books, since their discounts are terrific and they have a collection of books that TCRWP staff developers worked for the better part of a year to collect and level. BooksSource has a catalog of TCRWP books, but more importantly, they will provide you with any book on our website, [readingandwritingproject.com](http://readingandwritingproject.com) where our full text lists reside.

While much of this work will be your responsibility, it's also important that you teach your children to be independent and to find their own books. Remember that you will want to encourage and teach students how to make use of the resources available to them. You may decide to create a bulletin board space where students can post the titles of books they will need to read within their series—some students may have books at home they are willing to lend each other. Kids love to collect things: Zhu Zhu pets, Silly Bandz, Star Wars or Clone Wars action figures, and so on. To appeal to your children's innate desire to collect things you might consider creating little checklists of all the books in the series so that they can keep track and see if they can "collect" or "check off" every one.

## Selecting Your Read-Aloud

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Of course, you will use your read-aloud to support the work your children are doing in their own series. This probably means that you will choose to read a series aloud to your kids, and this presents a few choices for your consideration. One major concern about the selection of your read-aloud text is length—you won't really be showing what it means to read in a series until you are reading the second book in the series, so if these are long books, the time spent reading book one won't show children anything about series reading. If you have already read one book from a series, you may now read aloud the next book in the series, showing kids as you do this how you read the second book differently because you're comparing and contrasting it with the first. Or you may decide to use more complex picture books, like some of Patricia Polacco's

books that have recurring characters and can be thought of as belonging to a series. Or you may decide to use a series of short stories such as those within the anthology *The Stories Julian Tells*, which is a text recommended by the Common Core State Standards.

## Using the Series Unit to Launch Book Clubs and Move Kids Up Levels: Club Lessons to Weave throughout the Unit

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You'll want to launch book clubs in your room this month. The time is right: your kids have had enough experience in partnerships to extend their collaborative work to include more people. In first and second grade, your children were in reading clubs, where they learned to talk in groups about ideas in their books. They've learned to talk in turn, to listen respectfully, and to Post-it to respond to a text—work that they will be doing much more of in their clubs this month. This work matches the Common Core State Standards' suggestion that third graders should engage in a range of collaborative discussions around texts. In addition, by launching book clubs this month, you will be able to support readers in "talking essays." That is, you will teach them strategies for clearly stating a claim during club talk (for example, "Willimena worries too much about what other people think of her.") and supporting that claim with examples, in a paragraph-like structure. Other club members can look to see if the examples that a reader references actually make the reader's case, and can question the conclusions that readers are drawing. As readers challenge each other, they learn to draw explicitly on the text as a basis for their ideas about a book, and come to understand that readers are accountable to the text and to each other. You will want to encourage partners to "talk long" about an idea because what they are doing as they extend a conversation is learning to think in some depth. This work supports the first Common Core Standard in reading, which states that readers should be able to ask and answer questions that demonstrate an understanding of a text, explicitly referring to the text as the basis for the answers. You can also help the club time be a support for the work they'll do in their reading notebooks, as described at the end of the first part, "Launching the Unit: Teaching Clubs to Revisit and Lift the Level of Inferring about Characters." This will support the Common Core Standards' expectation that children engage in a range of collaborative discussions, including partnerships and small-group discussions.

Book clubs are also important because they provide opportunities for you to push your readers to read *more*. A club will only work if the members of that club have read to the same point in a shared text. This means that members of a club need to make and keep deadlines, saying, "By Wednesday, let's read up to chapter six." You will want to check to see if your children's self-imposed deadlines are aligned with Dick Allington's research (cited in the prelude of this calendar). Are children who read at level M reading at least three or four books a week? If children are reading level T texts, are they finishing at least one of these in a week? If not, then be aware that your reading curriculum may be getting in the way of your kids' reading development. Be sure children carry books between home and school, devoting time most evenings to

reading. It's not uncommon for book clubs to spotlight talk in ways that end up inadvertently jettisoning reading, so this means that the onset of book clubs is a time when reading logs are especially important. The research is clear: the more just-right reading a reader does, the better reader he or she will become.

You can use the structure of book clubs to support differentiated instruction by teaching readers in one club to work toward improving their volume of reading, for example, by firing up their attentiveness to this by asking them to be careful in logging their time and pages so they can make pacing and volume goals and track their progress. Meanwhile, you can help another club achieve its 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 clubs, helping club members articulate and set goals for their reading this month, and coaching members to use strategies that will help them meet these goals. You can also think about teaching in small groups across clubs, prompting those cross-club students to bring your teaching back to their respective clubs. For example, you may pull one student per club from three clubs, students you feel are ready to think about the effect the secondary character has on the main character. You could lead a strategy lesson where you coach students to get a few good Post-its written to share with their club. Then, when it's time for clubs to meet and talk, you might float between the clubs, nudging those children to share their thinking and push the other members of the club to think along with them about how Justin's friendship with Amber in *Amber Brown* shapes the kind of person she is, or how Toad would be lost without Frog in *Frog and Toad Are Friends*. The other children in the group will then learn from their peers and your teaching will have spread from three to twelve! For more on teaching into book clubs, refer to the description of book clubs in Calkins's *The Art of Teaching Reading*.

This unit also provides a natural opportunity for you to craft book introductions as a teaching tool. That is, you'll gather members of a club as they begin a new text together, and you'll guide them through some of the big moments they'll encounter as they read through this book. You might say: "Readers, I gathered you today because I wanted to give you a few tips as you begin reading the next book in this series. Carry with you all that you already know about Junie B. Jones, but also be on the lookout in chapter one for . . ."

This is a great time to work with clubs to move them up levels. Children who are just on the cusp of moving might benefit from you introducing the first book in a series chapter-by-chapter in a guided-reading-like format, and then by you introducing subsequent books with less support. The consistent characters and formulaic plots will help support them as they experience the challenges of this next higher level. This will be an especially important strategic move on your part for students in the K/L/M band of text difficulty to help them approach grade level standards for text complexity.

A different type of book introduction that supports readers in book clubs is one created around skills and strategies rather than the parts of the book. You might gather another book club further along in their reading. You might say: "Readers, I wanted to remind you today that when you read carrying with you bigger ideas, it's important

that you suspend judgment of the character because we know that characters, just like people, go through changes throughout the course of a book, and especially throughout a series. For example, we know that in the beginning Ramona seems like a real pest, always making trouble for her sister . . ." You could also use the bands of text difficulty to plan book introductions that pop out the major work of a particular band so that the club is poised to do the best work possible within the range of books they are tackling.

You'll also likely be thinking about how to support the skills and strategies of conversation as outlined in the Speaking and Listening Strand of the Common Core State Standards. You'll teach children to be active listeners, to be accountable to what the other club members say. "Club members listen with our eyes, as well as our ears," you might say, stressing that children look on attentively as a peer addresses the club. "Club members listen with our *shoulders* too," you might add, teaching a physical posture where readers lean in toward the speaker attentively. "When we respond to something a club member says, we do so respectfully," you'll say. You'll teach them to follow one line of conversation, adding on to grow thinking before moving on to a new idea. You'll teach them to come prepared to their club time with something written down, ready to elaborate on their ideas. All of this work will hopefully be a reminder to kids because ideally they've been practicing it in whole-class conversations off of the read-aloud as early as September, and in read-aloud book clubs leading up to this unit. Once kids get to a club, you'll teach them that one child can get the conversation started by sharing something provocative, important, or original, and then other members of the clubs can listen and extend the remark. You will want to point your readers again to the conversation prompts introduced in Unit Two:

- "What in the text makes you say that?"
- "I thought that too because . . ."
- "Another example of that is . . ."
- "I thought something different because . . ."
- "I agree because . . ."
- "Wait. I'm confused. Are you saying . . .?"
- "Can you show me the part in the story where you got that idea?"

The Common Core State Standards expect that children can determine or clarify the meaning of unknown words and phrases based on third-grade reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies. Throughout the unit, you'll want to equip children with strategies to tackle unfamiliar vocabulary. Continue to model specific word decoding strategies, especially in your read-aloud. "Stumble" across a word as you're reading aloud and repeat it tentatively, with phonic deliberation. Break up prefixes, suffixes, and root words if the word allows. Then use the class's collective awareness of the story context to guess what the word might mean, and what placeholder word might be used in its stead. Do this for at least two or three words in a day's read-aloud. Children

will internalize the processes they see you engage in repetitively. Later, when they're silently engaged in their own independent reading, they are likely to unconsciously tackle hard words in the same ways that they've watched you do in the read-aloud. You'll also want readers to actively acquire and begin using new vocabulary this month. Since members of a club are reading an identical text, vocabulary acquisition can be a whole-club venture. You may urge clubs to make a list of the new or difficult words they encountered while reading the same texts. Club members might note whether they were all challenged by the same words. They might develop a collective vocabulary list and help each other troubleshoot new words.

Some hard words can be *series specific*. Children reading the *Bailey School Kids* series, for instance, will encounter new vocabulary dealing specifically with mythical creatures. Among the words that feature in some *Bailey School Kids* titles are: *cyclops*, *gargoyles*, *phantoms*, *zombies*, *martians*, and *leprechauns*. Similarly, readers of the *Barkley's School for Dogs* series are likely to encounter a whole range of canine vocabulary: *vet-erinarian*, *doberman*, *kibble*, *beagle*. Again, you'll want the club to note and decipher these words, and possibly begin using them in their conversations.

## Part One: Launching the Unit—Teaching Clubs to Revisit and Lift the Level of Inferring about Characters

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You may decide to launch this unit with stories of readers who love series. You may be an avid series reader, and, if so, you will want to share your own reading experiences. If not, you can tell the stories of other readers who love series books. 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 troubles they encounter, and the way they change over time across books. This story highlights the connection series readers feel to the characters in their books, but also the voracious reading behaviors you want to encourage in this unit of study. Similarly, you may want to tell stories about groups of readers who become obsessed with a series and can't stop talking and thinking about the series. You could tell stories about people you know who are almost addicted to a television series, and perhaps even liken this to the way some people follow a sports team. Perhaps you could research some of the true tidbits about series books that are currently hot in America—telling kids about the paraphernalia that accompanies those books, and the fans. Remember, series reading is not new, and it is not just “kids' stuff”—Dickens's and Doyle's works were originally published as series.

Assuming that children are beginning the unit by starting the first book in a series, one of the challenges will be to launch in a way that signals the big work of the series unit, rather than stressing beginning-of-a-book strategies that work when a reader is reading *any* story, *any* narrative. You will want to remind the kids of what they already know how to do (envision the characters and the setting, for example), but also add teaching that sets them up for reading a whole series of books like the one they're start-

ing. If a reader has picked up her very first *Ramona* book, for example, you'll want this reader to get to know not just Beezus, but also the Quimby parents, their neighbors, and the general map of Klickitat Street because these characters and this setting are recurring features in future *Ramona* books as well. Similarly, if a third grader has picked up the first *Amber Brown*, you'll alert that reader to not skim past the parts about Justin Daniels, her friend, not just because of this one book but also because Justin will reappear in almost every other book in the series. So you will need to support the work that readers do whenever they are reading any fiction, but you will also want to put a new spin—a series spin—on that work. You'll also want to highlight ways that clubs can support some of these reading strategies. For example, a club could make a working map of the setting of the series (the neighborhood, the school, the backyard) that they bring out at the start of each meeting, so that they are working together to build and revise mental images of the world of the story.

Typically, you'll want each club to choose a series suited to their interest and reading levels and to start with the *first* book in this series. You'll monitor the reading deadlines that club members set. If, for example, a club decides to read two chapters in their book by a certain day, you'll want to check that this is indeed a satisfactory goal for this level (it shouldn't be too little) or that this is indeed a realistic goal (it can't be too ambitious). Remember, you want clubs to have read *at least* three to four books from one series, and then another three to four from another series within the course of this month, so you'll not want them to dally too long in the first of these. Monitor that clubs pace themselves in a way that the first book in a series ends within the first few days so that your instruction, too, has a chance to move forward.

You'll coach into the conversations clubs might have as they get to know the characters. Teach children to Post-it points in the initial pages of the book in ways that help them get to know a character. You might teach readers who need more help inferring by asking them to collect information about a character, and you'll teach specific prompts that will lead them to infer.

- When Pinky said \_\_\_\_\_, it made Rex feel \_\_\_\_\_.
- When Pinky did \_\_\_\_\_, it made Rex feel \_\_\_\_\_.
- Pinky did \_\_\_\_\_ for Rex, which lets me know he is a \_\_\_\_\_ kind of person. (trait)
- Pinky did this and this and this, which lets me know that he is feeling \_\_\_\_\_. (emotions)
- Rex did this and this and this, which made Pinky feel \_\_\_\_\_.
- Rex did this and this and this, which made Pinky do \_\_\_\_\_ because he is feeling \_\_\_\_\_.
- Rex did this and this and this, which made Pinky do \_\_\_\_\_ because he is a \_\_\_\_\_ kind of person. (trait)
- Both Pinky and Rex are friends who \_\_\_\_\_ or are people who \_\_\_\_\_.

“Junie B. Jones speaks in a funny way,” a child might note while reading the series by Paula Danziger, or “Lucas Cott is really bored in school because . . .” as they begin the series by Johanna Hurwitz. Ask readers to bring these Post-its or small jottings about characters to the club conversation. Teach them also to cite the specific spots in the book, using words such as *chapter* and *scene* (as the Common Core State Standards expect), words that support their observation about a character so they acquire a habit for accountable talk. As clubs progress through chapters, you’ll add teaching points about the story arc. “As we get deeper into our books,” you might say, “readers ask, ‘What is the problem that the main character faces? What or who stands in the way?’ ‘Why or how is one character causing problems for another?’” You could also teach them to ask questions that connect to prior units, such as: “How is this problem affecting all of the characters, not just the one we know the best?” Urge kids to make predictions based on different characters’ points of view: “How might this problem be resolved?” “How would this character like it to resolve? What about this other character?” When children finish reading they should revisit these conversations and talk about “How *did* the problem get resolved? Why did it get resolved this way? Was everyone happy with how the problem was resolved or did it create a new problem for someone?”

You will probably want to bring out your charts from the character unit as a way to prompt kids to ask themselves: “Am I doing my strongest thinking about these characters? Am I using all I know to pay attention in ways that will pay off?” If you were teaching from *Following Characters into Meaning*, in the *Units of Study* series, you may wish to revisit (or try for the first time if you didn’t get to it during the character unit) the Share from Session VI: “Readers Decide How to Lift the Level of Our Reading and Recruit Partners to Support Us.”

Book clubs rely upon kids to develop ideas while reading the book at home, jot those ideas somewhere, and then bring them to school the next day, all in preparation for the conversation. If your children have not yet become accustomed to writing as a way to capture their own ideas, if they’re not holding onto their ideas in this fashion, you’ll want to help children 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 to “get ready for their talk.” The DVD from the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading* offers an example of a small-group lesson on preparing for talk. The teacher gives helpful tips for how to move from jots and notes to a more synthesized thought worthy of bringing to a club. See DVD2 U4-3.

At this point in the unit we should try to encourage children to have written about a dozen or so Post-its in their current independent reading book, and we should ensure that these Post-its capture ideas (not just predictions) about the characters. After finishing the first book in a series you’ll want to teach your children to organize the thinking they’ve done so far in their reading notebooks. Perhaps you’ll ask them to take out all of their Post-its and put them into piles—one pile for each character they studied or thought about. Or maybe they’ll choose their best four Post-its about one character, and pile them on one page, and look for patterns. They can then come to their club ready to talk about the prevalent idea about a character. You can teach them to speak

in an essay in the air. They would do this by saying first their idea, as if it is a thesis statement (“I think \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_”). Then, follow up their idea with one support (“I think \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_ because in this part, he/she \_\_\_\_\_”), then a second support (“Then later, in this part he/she \_\_\_\_\_”), then ending with a concluding statement (“This evidence shows that \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_”). Kids can talk about the ideas as a club, give each other feedback, and shape each other’s thinking. Then, in their notebooks, you may nudge children to write the essay they just spoke, taking their short bits of thinking on Post-its and writing a lot about one character.

## **Part Two: Reading Second, Third, and Fourth Books within a Series—Revising Theories, Providing Relevant Textual Evidence, and Moving into Interpretation**

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The aim of this part is to teach children that when we read, we want to collect all of our thinking about our characters and begin to name what we think these characters are really all about. This means that our ideas cease to live on one page, in one scene, or even in one book, and instead spread to as much of the series as possible. It is when a club progresses to the second book in a series that your instruction, too, can turn 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 readers and clubs might make a list of ways in which the same character grows or changes in this second book. After their Post-it sorting, talking, and notebook writing, children will come to this second book in the series with working theories about the kind of people the characters are in their books. The work is now to help children carry those ideas into a second book in a series, and to allow themselves to think flexibly to revise or confirm their initial theories. Children may look at their initial theories about a character to ask, “Was I right about Lucas?” or “Is Lucas still the same person he was in the last book or are there ways in which he has changed?” Most books in a series have characters who fit a type (class clown, smart kid, supporting girls) and plots that are formulaic. In many ways, therefore, the second book will reinforce the patterns set in the first.

To notice patterns in the series (a character trait that is repeated or a plot structure that is constant across books) and then to consider the effects of these patterns is sophisticated work. Your kids may need more support during conferences and reminders during club reading time, to move beyond noticing and naming to thinking about what this pattern helps them understand or predict about the characters or story lines. For example, Amelia Bedelia is always messing things up—this pattern is easy to recognize. But a critical third-grade reader, even when reading a series like this that is below grade level, can push himself to ask: “What does this repeated character trait make me think about Amelia?” At this point, readers can debate their interpretations. Some may think this makes the reader think less of Amelia, that she’s not very bright—others may think

that this is just the author’s way of creating funny scenes that leave you laughing. Each interpretation will demand examples from the text to provide support.

To support readers in this interpretive work, you will want to teach them to consider more than just the current problem the characters are facing. They may begin to think about how a new problem connects to other similar obstacles the character has faced in past stories, how a current goal goes with goals in previous books. Readers may begin to ask ourselves: “What resources does the character draw upon, from deep inside, to meet the challenges and reach their goals?” (Session XVI of *Following Characters into Meaning* talks about these questions at greater length.) The beauty of these questions is that they apply no matter what the story because, after all, stories are built on a problem/resolution structure. *All* characters long for something. *All* characters face obstacles. *All* characters respond in some way. And *all* characters rely on something in themselves when they face their challenges. Understanding this narrative structure and learning to look at characters through this lens will set children on the path to getting at the heart of *any* character they encounter, in *any* book. And asking these questions leads any of us to rich understandings not only of characters, but of a book’s messages, of life lessons.

As children begin to move from inferences about characters to theories about characters, they may stop short at times, pronouncing a single idea to be *the* idea. They may, for example, stall on something such as “Rob is a wimp” and declare their interpretive work done. You’ll want to teach them ways to keep themselves going, producing more thinking, more ideas, more writing. One easy way to get kids to elaborate is to set them up with conversational prompts they can use as they talk in partnerships. We can go back to the prompts we have been using with children during partner work and during our writing about reading work, lifting the level of the work we are prompting for toward more synthesis and interpretation.

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

There are additional prompts in the chart “Conversation Prompts to Keep Partner Talk Going . . .” on page 158 of *Following Characters into Meaning*. You’ll of course have your own ideas for prompts or other ways to get children to grow their thinking even bigger—and children will have ideas, too! Bring them in on the decision making so that they feel ownership in this big important work. Always, we want to encourage independence in a workshop, and there’s no better way than to issue an invitation to children to author their own reading or writing work.

As you teach young readers to grow ideas in book clubs, you will want to build from the bands of text-difficulty work you did in the character unit, and use that to inform your whole-class and small-group teaching. For example, readers who are working with K/L/M texts will probably find that those texts feature one or two main characters, each of whom is characterized by a couple of dominant character traits, which are usually very much related to the story line. For example, in the series *Pinky and Rex*, Pinky is a character who likes more traditionally “girl” things like the color pink and stuffed animals, while his best friend Rex is a character who likes more “boy” things like dinosaurs. It will not require a lot of inference for readers of these texts to deduce what their characters are like as people. These characters won’t tend to change, either, although their feelings will. As readers move to the second book in a series, what changes are the situations the character experiences—dealing with a bully and learning the importance of being yourself, getting a new baby brother and learning that your parents have room to love you both. Readers can be taught to notice the main events in the stories and how those main events affect the main characters, but readers should not, however, be taught to talk about major character change across the course of the series because that won’t exist.

Meanwhile, once readers are reading texts in the N/O/P/Q band of text difficulty, characters will become more contradictory. They’ll feel one thing and something contrary to that as well. Readers will often find that the text comes right out and tells them about this emotional complexity. For example, in the *Amber Brown* series, Amber deals with a different situation in each book. In one, *Amber Brown Is Not a Crayon*, she learns to accept that her best friend, Justin, is moving away. We see several sides of her personality across the course of the book—the loyal friend, the hurt little girl who acts cruel, the child who is still comforted by a talk with her mom, the child who accepts life’s hardships and learns to grow from them. At this band of text difficulty, it is common for a character to change by the end of the story, and readers can be taught to think about this.

You will be able to introduce many different strategies for comparing characters, such as: readers can think about how the same character may act similarly or differently across a book or across books in a series (character change); about how one character acts one way with one set of characters and another with a different set of characters; or about how the same issue (like Amber’s mom’s divorce) affects different characters in similar or different ways. In each of these scenarios, you can teach clubs a variety of ways to think and speak comparatively. For example, you may introduce some comparative sentence starters to get the ball rolling: “This character seems more/less \_\_\_\_\_ than the other characters. I see this when \_\_\_\_\_. I think the reason for this is \_\_\_\_\_.” You may also remind students of comparative endings (*-er* and *-est*). You may use additional prompts with clubs to get them to fill in both sides of a comparison: if Mrs. Sweetly (in *Willimena Rules! How to Lose Your Class Pet*) seems nicer at the end of the book, it’s important to talk about how kind she is to Willimena at the end, but also to carry it through and discuss how she seemed frightening in the beginning of the book, and to put forth possible reasons for this difference.

Aside from just character work, there are other ways in which club members might compare and contrast the two books within the series, as the Common Core State Standards suggest. Much in the way that adults addicted to a series may debate which single book is the best in the series, children can also decide which of the two books was more exciting or funny 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 nth) book in a series is children's chance at experiencing the second (or nth) book by *the same author*. This increases their ability to recognize this author's specific craft moves, writing style, and general voice. (For example, Gertrude Warner, though she created the *Boxcar Children*, wrote only nineteen of the hundred-plus books in the *Boxcar Children* series. Readers might pick up that writing styles vary across the books in the series as they become accustomed to "hearing" that each author has a distinct writing voice.) Your young readers will not only come to love a series, they will also come to love the author behind them. You may decide to urge the children in your club to visit this author's fan page or to write to this author with their observations and/or suggestions.

You will want readers to be aware of and to look out for the plot lines that continue from one text to another. In many cases, the struggles the characters face in a series are not entirely resolved in neat and tidy ways. Instead, these struggles are transformed or carried from one book to the next. If you have an advanced book club in the room that will benefit from instruction and discussions around themes, you might teach them to identify how a particular theme runs through multiple books within a series. In the *Shiloh* series, for instance, some of the struggles Marty's family faces are related to their poverty. The theme of poverty is carried across the series, and readers need to attend to this issue across the series. Teaching readers 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 more complex texts.

In simpler children's series, main characters tend to remain the same age across all the books (e.g., *Pinky and Rex*) while series at slightly higher reading levels have characters who mature quite distinctly across successive books—for example, Junie B. Jones graduates to the next grade across the series, and Cleary's Ramona may be followed in her growth from a pesky four-year-old to a sensitive fourth grader. This is another chance to differentiate instruction between clubs. Higher-level readers may be encouraged to track ways in which their character matures as he or she grows older while you'll coach your lower-level readers (whose books will tend to be more formulaic to scaffold comprehension) to note the pattern of how each book in a series "tends to go." Regardless, all readers will be able to talk about their characters in more nuanced ways as they head into their third book in a series, which will help them to choose words and phrases for effect when they are thinking, speaking, and writing about their books as expected in the Common Core State Standards. Furthermore, after reading multiple

books in a series, you can invite readers to distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters, as expected in the Common Core State Standards.

In many ways, your readers are interpreting now—holding onto one big idea about a character and seeking out both corroborating evidence and contradictions that they must address. However, at this point in the unit, kids are most likely doing this work on their character’s traits (albeit in sophisticated and beautiful ways), and perhaps how they see their character changing in the books they are reading. You can push your readers further by asking them to focus on not only new ideas they have about their characters, but also by looking at what lessons the character is learning in this story. Readers can ask themselves, “What does Amber Brown learn about friendship?” or “How does Amber learn to deal with loss?” and by standing on their strong inferences, readers can begin to think about big lessons the author might want us to learn. In doing this thinking work, readers will be very close to studying themes.

For example, you can demonstrate how to do this work by looking at the very same Post-its you used earlier in the part:

- Amber is upset that her best friend Justin is moving.
- Amber’s mom helped console her when she felt bad about Justin moving.
- Amber played a made-up basketball game with Justin. This part shows how long she and Justin have been friends.
- Amber said she was going to miss Justin after they make up.

And now you can look at these Post-its, asking yourself, “What lessons does the character learn about these people, problems, or ideas?” By doing this, we may begin to generate even bigger thoughts about our books. You might say, for instance, “Amber learns that it’s hard to have friends move away,” or “Amber learns not to take friends for granted, because they may not be in our lives forever.” Sometimes it helps to first name the problems that a character faces in a book, and then to ask ourselves, “What lessons does the character learn about \_\_\_\_\_ (the problem).” Of course, as kids begin this harder thematic work, they may go back to simpler ideas, such as “Amber learns that friends are important.” While for some children this may be a great goal to attain, for others you may want to go back now to the prompts and partnerships that have helped students to think in bigger, better, more complex ways from the beginning of the unit. “Amber learns that her friendship means too much to not make up with Justin before he leaves,” or “Amber learns that it’s part of life to have people you love move away.”

Below are some more examples of Post-its from the *Skinny-Bones* series that can help you model this interpretive work:

- Alex enjoys being the center of attention and making people laugh.
- Alex is jealous of T.J. Stoner because T.J. is better at sports.
- Alex is constantly comparing himself to his peers.

And now you can look at these Post-its, asking yourself, “What lessons does the character learn about these people, problems, or ideas?” By doing this, we may begin to generate even bigger thoughts about our books. You might say, for instance, “Alex learns that he has something to be proud of when he wins the Kitty Fritters TV Contest.” Sometimes it helps to first name the problems that a character faces in a book, and then to ask ourselves, “What lessons does the character learn about \_\_\_\_\_ (the problem)?” And then we might push ourselves to answer: “Alex learns to accept himself for who he is.” Of course, as kids begin this harder thematic work, they may hearken back to simpler ideas, such as: “While for some students this may be a great place to get to, for others we will want to go back now to the prompts and partnerships that have helped our students to think in bigger, better, more complex ways from the beginning of the unit. “Alex learns that everyone is unique and talented at something; sometimes it just takes a while to find what we are good at.”

Previously, you taught children to talk more accountably by citing or pointing to specific passages in their books as they discussed or wrote about a character theory. As clubs mature, they’ll have *several* texts—several books in a series—that they will reference during a group discussion. Continue to nudge children into making intertextual connections and to citing specific instances or examples from a particular text as they make a claim about a character. Model how a club member might “prepare” for raising a particular point in a club conversation by marking beforehand the specific spots in the *two* or *three* texts that support this point. Show children also 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 through 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.

You might ask them to simply star the Post-its or entries they think did an especially good job of carrying ideas, articulate what it was about a particular Post-it or entry that made it work, and then use it as a mentor Post-it, a mentor entry. Then children can continue to read, this time with the goal to produce equally thoughtful responses to reading.

### **Part Three: Comparing and Contrasting Different Characters and Themes from Different Series**

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You might end the unit by pushing your clubs to begin a new series in the last third or quarter of the month. Once children have read across 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 children move into a second series as a club, they can work slightly more independently in the second series. While you may still introduce readers to the first book in the series, you may also guide 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 look across different *series* and to notice similarities and differences. For example, a club may ponder: “How is Amber Brown different from Junie B. Jones?” or “What about these two series (*The Bailey School Kids* series and the *Barkley’s School for Dogs* series) suggests that they are works by the same author (Marcia Thornton Jones)?” This encourages readers to carry not only reading strategies, but also a knowledge of character types and typical plot lines from series to series and ultimately from book to book.

As part of this work, clubs may explore how story plots and characters in an individual series remain the same throughout the books, and that multiple series, too, explore similar themes and character types. The *Junie B. Jones* and *Judy Moody* series both feature willful, sassy heroines who get themselves into trouble again and again. Dink, Josh, Ruth Rose, and Jigsaw Jones are all detectives. Pinky and Rex and Ivy and Bean are two sets of friends. Then, too, there are ways in which series mirror but don’t quite match one another. Clubs who read similar series might think not only about character differences and similarities, but also about parallel (or diverging) themes. For example, both the *Julian* series by Ann Cameron and Beverly Cleary’s *Ramona* series feature siblings; however, whereas Huey looks up to his older brother, Julian, Ramona tends to pester and resent her older sister, Beezus. They can ask themselves, “What are the big ideas or problems that happen again and again in these series? How are they alike? How are they different?” Many authors of children’s series explore similar themes, so children will encounter kids who get into trouble (and can ask themselves, “Why does this character get into trouble over and over?”), who try to solve crimes, who have friendship successes and failures, who do everything they can to fit in—or to stand out, kids who struggle with particular family dynamics—a new sibling, an old sibling, divorce.

Some clubs may choose two members to be in charge of a couple of books in one series, while the other members are in charge of 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 comparing and contrasting big ideas across series. Yet other clubs may focus their comparisons on books of a particular kind, e.g., series that are funny, series that get our hearts racing, detective series. Throughout this work, you’ll want to continue to support the work children do, while also encouraging their independence.

Again, you’ll want to encourage and support your students in using Post-its to hold onto their ideas so they can talk and write about them more readily. Then, too, you’ll want to support children 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.

As you head toward the end of this part and unit, now is a perfect time to urge kids to develop bigger, more universal theories, by looking across characters and across series. For example, the child who earlier landed on the idea that “Amber learns that it’s

part of life to have people you love leave” might, after drawing comparisons between Amber Brown and Alex (*Skinny-Bones*), grow the theory that “when children are hurt/abandoned by or lose a mother, they struggle in significant ways. Some kids create a protective hard shell to keep people out, some have a hard time letting the past go, and others struggle to let their feelings out and people in.” The hope is that children begin to make connections not only across books, but across books and life.

Throughout this unit, as you confer with clubs and encourage them to provide textual evidence for their ideas, you might encourage children to extrapolate these ideas to the world around them. You can help them move beyond noticing and commenting on the series books, to also thinking about their own experiences and knowledge of the world. To help with this work, they could use prompts such as: “What do both of these series make you think about friendship now? How did these series change or support what you already thought?” or “Do these series show similar or different ideas on bullying? Is your thinking about bullying closer to the ideas in one series or the other?” This work also supports the Common Core State Standards expectation that third graders distinguish between an author’s or narrator’s point of view and their own points of view.

All sessions that are referenced come from *Following Characters into Meaning: Building Theories, Gathering Evidence*, Volume 2.

## Additional Resources

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If this is the first unit of study in which students are in a club, you’ll need to weave in some more teaching around club goals, management, and talk. Just like in any unit, though, it’s important to hold students accountable for what they’ve learned in previous years. This may not be the first time students have had to talk to each other after reading the same book, and so you can use that as a starting point for your teaching. However, for most third graders, this may be the first time they are reading the same title independently and setting deadlines that all club members have to meet. In this case, students will need lots of support determining what’s both realistic and ambitious at the same time. At first, third graders have the tendency to aim too high (“Let’s finish this whole book by tomorrow!”) or take it too easy (“Let’s read one chapter tonight.”) and will need some guidance from you.

In this unit, each part builds on the one that came before, asking students to think in more complicated and nuanced ways and synthesizing more and more information. For example, in the beginning of the unit, we teach students to synthesize scenes across a single text, noticing patterns and changes in character feelings and behavior and inferring traits. Later, students need to synthesize scenes not just across a single text but using multiple texts, to notice larger patterns in plot and behavior. In addition, as students read more and more within a series, they’ll need to pay attention to secondary and tertiary characters, noticing not just one character at a time but the relationships between characters. As the unit proceeds, this becomes more and more complicated as students have to think across larger amounts of text.

You'll want to think about the work you did in the character unit from the fall. If your students read mainly for literal understanding and struggled to infer feelings within a single scene, you'll want to slow down at the beginning of this unit, spending more time on idea development and character traits. However, if you spent time already developing complicated theories about characters in the fall, your students will probably be ready for an accelerated series unit, in which you move quickly into motivations, relationships, and interpretation. For more on this advanced character work, you can refer to the second volume of *Following Characters into Meaning*.

It will also be vital for you to think about the text levels in which your students are reading. If most of your class is reading levels J, K, L, and M, you may spend more teaching time on feelings, how they change, and what causes the change. In these levels, traits are usually stagnant across a single text and across a series. However, in level N, O, P, and Q, characters change in traits after learning important life lessons. If most of your class is reading within these levels, you can spend more time teaching character complexity and development.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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### **Part One: Launching the Unit—Teaching Clubs to Revisit and Lift the Level of Inferring about Characters**

- “Readers know that it’s important to bring all we know about studying a character to our new series. Today I want to teach you that in a series, it’s important not just to envision the main character, but to envision the secondary characters as well because those characters will reappear throughout.”
- “Today I want to teach you that series readers also keep track of and envision the settings throughout the book. We might quickly sketch those settings to keep track of where important events in the story take place. As new details about the settings emerge, we revise our mental images (and also our sketches) so that these reflect our most recent thinking.”
- “Today I want to teach you that clubs need to set reading goals so that all the members are reading at the same pace and are reading to discuss the same amount. Once a club has set one goal, it’s important to ask one another, ‘Did that feel like the right amount? Could we read more next time? Did we all finish what we said we would?’ Then we make new goals based on this discussion.”
- “Today I want to teach you that once readers are deeper into a book, we might start to notice patterns in a character’s actions or feelings. One thing readers do is stop at this point and ask, ‘What kind of a person is this character?’ We push

ourselves not just to name a single feeling, but to name a trait this character is displaying.”

- “Today I want to teach you that readers not only develop an idea about the main character, but also about the relationships between characters. We notice parts when two characters interact and they ask, ‘What is this teaching me about their relationship? How would I describe it?’”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers notice what problems the character is facing and how he/she is dealing with that problem. How a character reacts in the face of trouble can give us important information about this character. We might notice a new trait or revise our initial thoughts about this character.”

### **Part Two: Reading Second, Third, and Fourth Books within a Series—Revising Theories, Providing Relevant Textual Evidence, and Moving into Interpretation**

- “Today I want to teach you that as readers finish a couple of books in the same series, we begin to look for patterns not just in a single book, but across multiple books. We might ask ourselves, ‘What’s new in this book? What’s the same about this character in both books? What’s changed in this book?’”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers can also compare how the situation or problem is similar or different in multiple books in a series. We might also compare and contrast how the main character reacts to these different problems.”
- “Today I want to teach you that once a reader knows a character well and notices patterns across many books, we can use this knowledge to make some predictions. We can predict how the character will react or solve a problem. We can even make larger predictions about how another book in the series might go based on how previous books went.”
- “Today I want to teach you that when a character acts in a certain way over and over again, that behavior is often there to teach the reader a lesson. We might stop and ask, ‘What lesson does this character need to learn about life? What is this book trying to teach me?’”
- “Today I want to teach you that we can push ourselves to think deeply about a character by asking ‘Why?’ We might notice a trait or a pattern in behavior and ask, ‘Why does the character keep doing that?’ or ‘Why is the character that way?’ In this way, we think about causes of character traits and motivations.”

- “Readers know that no character, or person, is one way. Today I want to teach you that once we have a single idea about a character, we push ourselves to think of more complex ideas. We might say, ‘On the one hand . . . but on the other hand.’ Or we could say, ‘One side of this character is . . . but she can also be . . .’ In this way, we grow richer theories about characters.”

### **Part Three: Comparing and Contrasting Different Characters and Themes from Different Series**

- “Today I want to remind you that when readers get about halfway through our books (or when our books are bursting with ideas), it is wise to take some time to organize our thoughts. One way to do this is to sort our Post-it notes into piles of ideas that seem to go together. We read across these Post-its and push ourselves to grow a theory. We might say, ‘This is important because . . .’ or ‘This makes me realize that . . .’ or ‘The bigger idea here is that . . .’” [From Session XIV: “Synthesizing Insights into Ideas about Books”]
  - *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Once we have found Post-its that go together in some way and we’ve grown a theory off of those Post-its, we can look back over the parts of the book we’ve already read, looking to see if there is more evidence to support our theory. It may be that we find there is evidence that goes against our theory. If this happens, we can revise our theory. If not we can read on, thinking, ‘Does my theory hold true, or based on what is happening should I revise my theory?’”
- “Today I want to teach you that once readers have a grown theory, a big idea, we reread and read on with that theory in hand, looking for information that will change or grow our thinking.”
  - *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Readers, sometimes we are scared to write down our theories because we feel that our ideas are not good enough. Readers need to not worry about that because we can take those flimsy ideas and make them more substantial. The bottom line is not to be nervous because any starting point is fine. If we don’t have a starting point then we can’t help it grow.”
- “Readers believe that when thinking about stories, it can deepen our reading to pay attention to characters in general and to their motivations and struggles in particular. Today I want to teach you that one way to be insightful about people and characters is to think, ‘What does this person seem to desire? What motivates this person?’ That is, when you are good at reading people, this means you understand what drives a person. Usually, the main character in a story, the protagonist, has desires that lead him or her to go after something, and, predictably, the character ends up struggling to reach that goal. Usually, something gets in the way, there are obstacles, and the main character has to try, try, try to reach the goal.”



- “Today I want to remind you that we can look back on the jotted notes we make as we read and research our thinking, asking, ‘What sort of thinking do I tend to do as I read?’ After we spy on our own thinking, we can put together all the clues that we see, and together, these can help us construct a sense of ourselves as readers. We can come away from this saying, ‘I’m the sort of reader who does a lot of this kind of thinking and who doesn’t do a lot of that kind of thinking.’ We can then give ourselves goals so that we deliberately outgrow our current habits as readers and thinkers.”
- ▶ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Once we’ve set goals for ourselves, we keep those in mind as we read. Sometimes when we set new goals, we have to push ourselves to meet them. As you get back into your books, keep your new reading goals in mind, and if you haven’t yet put any of them into action, make sure you start doing that before it’s time to stop for math.”



## UNIT FOUR

# Nonfiction Reading

## *Expository Texts*

### LATE NOVEMBER/DECEMBER

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: N)

This marks the time of year when your students will leave the adventures of their characters, their struggles and changes, and move into the world of the water cycle and whales, spaceships and skateboarding. They'll want to leap at the whole new section of the library you'll open up for them, with a drum roll to announce the start of this new adventure you'll take together as a class. Maybe you'll clear off the chalkboard ledge and fill it with the coolest, most beautiful, most awe-inspiring nonfiction books in your library. Maybe you'll surprise your students with a bulletin board cleared of all their character work, and in its place, a display of maps and newspapers, brochures, blogs, photographs, websites, and magazine clippings. Perhaps you'll start on the first day showing them a short clip from a popular TV show that highlights a child, curious to explore new facts and cool information such as *Bill Nye the Science Guy*. Regardless, you'll help all your readers feel at home in this new genre, and hope to especially entice readers who may have felt like stories were not exactly their cup of tea.

This unit is tailor-made for early in the third-grade year. Although this unit of study leans heavily on the *Navigating Nonfiction in Expository Texts* book from the *Units of Study for Reading 3–5* series, we suggest the following trajectory because we acknowledge that that two-volume set may be a bit too packed and ambitious for younger readers. This unit aims to take the first book in the two-volume set more slowly to teach third graders the reading work that will help them read expository nonfiction with clarity, depth, and power. We've written about places where you might slow down and linger for a while on certain skills, stretching one session across several days.

At this point in the year, you'll know your readers well. You'll likely observe and notice the skills they've already demonstrated in reading nonfiction during your science and social studies times of day. You'll listen to the ways they respond to your turn-and-talk prompts during your nonfiction read-alouds. Use those observations of your students in combination with the suggestions in this curriculum calendar to make decisions about where to linger longer, and where to pick up the pace.

In this curricular calendar write-up, we outline a unit of study in which you give children stretches of time to read whole texts, reading not to answer a specific question or to mine for an interesting fact, but rather to learn what the author wants to teach. The unit spotlights skills and habits essential to a reader of expository nonfiction: determining importance and finding the main idea and supportive details; questioning and talking back to the text; figuring out and using new content-specific vocabulary; and applying analytical thinking skills to compare and contrast, rank or categorize.

The first part of the unit tackles portions of what the Common Core State Standards describe as determining "Key Ideas and Details." Our goal in this part is to help children get what the other is saying. For children 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 will need to grasp the text's infrastructure. Since your readers will also be writing information books while they engage in this nonfiction reading work, they will be able to recognize that expository texts follow a "boxes-and-bullets" structure. The "box" is the main idea, and the "bullets" are the details. If readers expect this infrastructure and if they learn to use text features, white space, and transitional phrases to help them discern that infrastructure, they will be able to glean what matters from texts that contain an overwhelming amount of raw information. In their partnerships, readers will learn how to teach each other what they're learning by being engaging teachers—using their whole body and gestures, not just their words.

The second part of the unit asks readers to not only paraphrase and synthesize, but also to learn to think and talk about the texts they are reading. Though they may begin with reactions like "Weird!" or "Cool!" or "I never knew that \_\_\_\_\_," you will want to push kids to notice places in the text that draw them in, and you'll want to nudge kids to question the information they're reading. Then, we'll teach them that nonfiction readers read on, seeking out information. They'll take the new information together with the information they've already learned and what they know about drawing conclusions. Partners can work together here to talk long about questions, to synthesize key parts of their text, and to develop a knowledge base together.

The third part of the unit explores vocabulary. When reading books on unfamiliar subjects, it's predictable that a reader will encounter new words. We aim in this part to teach readers to pronounce, understand, and use the vocabulary that they encounter. The Common Core State Standards stress the importance of teaching students to determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in texts relevant to third-grade topics and subjects. In this part, you'll help them to use text features and context clues to help understand new vocabulary, of course, but also to take the words to their partnership time to teach their partner using the language of a real expert.

For a final, extended leg of this unit, we suggest that you organize text sets on specific topics of inquiry for small groups to study. This means putting together sets comprising several multilevel books on a single topic that two partnerships, a small group of four, will share. You'll teach children to read these texts critically, discerning different perspectives and reporting angles. They'll apply analytical thinking skills like comparing and contrasting, ranking, and categorizing to synthesize across texts. After reading deeply about this one topic, the group of students may create a quick one-day expert project to share their newfound expertise with others.

## Preparing for This Unit: Your Classroom Library

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To support the work of this unit, your children will need to be matched to texts in nonfiction, as they've been matched to their fiction books all year. In matching your children to just-right books you'll likely consider *level* and *topic*. At this time of year, the majority of your readers will likely be around a level L/M/N. There is some research to suggest that when children read nonfiction, they should read a notch below the level at which they read in fiction, although that does not apply when a child has a tremendous amount of background knowledge about the topic. Keep in mind that many nonfiction books are deceptive. Their lush photographs can mask the difficulty level of a book.

As you and your readers collect texts for this unit, you will want to remember that many of your readers should be poised to move up text levels within this unit. During the last part of this unit your children will have been reading nonfiction for at least three weeks, so they should be fairly proficient. Then, too, they'll be reading a bunch of text on topics of interest. They'll probably read the easier texts first, and those texts will provide readers with the domain-specific vocabulary and the conceptual knowledge so they are poised to be able to comprehend more challenging texts. They'll also be reading alongside other inquirers, and the conversations around shared texts provide the same sort of scaffolding that you provide during guided reading sessions. Then, too, you can take any text-set inquiry group and think of that group as a guided reading group, working with them to be sure they have the requisite skills to read texts of increasing difficulty.

To help with your ordering and organizing of materials, you can find a leveled bibliography of nonfiction texts on the TCRWP website, with a section devoted to texts that are expository.

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. Creating same-text partnerships early on in the unit can provide wonderful scaffolds for readers. If same-text partnerships aren't possible with the library you have, you may want to have children in the same topic.

Ideally, nonfiction texts in the classroom library will:

- Have a fairly clear organizational infrastructure.
- Be at difficulty levels where children can read with fluency, comprehension, and accuracy.

- Be highly engaging texts.
- Be varied enough to allow children to have some choice over what topics they read about, including topics related to social studies, science, and history.
- Be organized into same-topic baskets to allow children to read up in level of difficulty.

Instead of closing the rest of your library, we strongly suggest that you reserve time every day (at least fifteen to twenty minutes in school and more time at home) for children to continue reading just-right chapter books in fiction, using and practicing all the skills you've already taught. This is essential to keep up their volume of reading and helps them to maintain their fiction reading skills. Also, be sure children continue to maintain their reading logs. Monitor that they're reading the proper number of chapter books each week—probably anywhere from one to four, *in addition to* the informational nonfiction texts they read.

## Part One: Introducing Readers to Expository Nonfiction—Understanding Key Ideas and Details

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As called for in the Common Core State Standards, this part teaches children to determine the main idea, to make it a habit to pause to name that main idea regularly as they read, and to add on this information as they go from section to section, recounting key details and how they support the main idea. 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* when he writes, “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).

You'll want to begin right away by teaching young readers to pay attention to expository nonfiction texts' underlying structure. Once children 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 information. They can use that knowledge to structure their own reading, allowing parts of the text to take on greater significance while letting other parts of the text fall away.

Session I in *Navigating Nonfiction: Volume I* describes how nonfiction demands a more “sit up and learn” posture than a story that allows us to fall into another world and walk in the character's shoes. You may want to begin by teaching your readers how it's a good idea to rev up your mind to read in this way, and that the way most nonfiction texts are structured allows you to do this well. You can notice what the author highlights in bold, and the text features he or she chooses when you first turn to a page: titles, subtitles, photos, captions, and charts. These features help you to get ready to take in the new information on the page, thinking “What's this page (or two-page spread, or chapter)

likely to be about? What do I know about this topic already?" In doing so, children will take a stab at the main idea before they even begin reading the words.

One challenge for eight- and nine-year-olds is revision of thinking. You've undoubtedly worked with students on this in your last unit of study, where readers may have gotten an idea about the character on page five, then stuck to that idea throughout the text. You taught those children to read and revise their thinking, adding new information, synthesizing it and developing a new theory about the character. Well, it's likely the same will be true in nonfiction. If you've taught your children to get ready to read a page by noticing the headings and features, and then to anticipate a main idea, they'll then need to read on and check that thinking. They'll need to revise their main idea by thinking: "I was right about the *topic* of these two pages—it is about whales—but I was wrong about the main *idea*. This part is actually mostly about how fishermen are a danger to whales in the Arctic, not just where whales live." This flexibility of thinking, although challenging, is an important goal to take on!

In this early part of the unit—just the first few days—your readers will ideally be in same-book partnerships, or at least same-topic partnerships. Their early partnership work by the second day of the unit will be to practice this work with their partner, and get feedback. You may give your children actual phrases to use as they talk, such as: "This heading says \_\_\_\_\_, so I think this page is mostly about \_\_\_\_\_," or "I looked at this (picture/caption/graph) and saw \_\_\_\_\_, and this (picture/caption/graph) and saw \_\_\_\_\_. If I put them together, I think these pages will be about \_\_\_\_\_. "You might teach readers to scan across the page, part-by-part, and point to or circle the aspects they are paying particular attention to with a finger. Their partner should give them feedback and adjust or revise what the first partner said. It might sound like this: "But look at this (picture/caption/graph) where I see \_\_\_\_\_. So now I'm thinking that maybe \_\_\_\_\_."

As the week goes on, you'll show children a number of strategies for determining the main idea in their texts. You might show them next how expository nonfiction often contains a central idea followed—or surrounded—by supporting evidence. In your teaching, you will probably model reading a mentor text with an eye toward that central idea as well as for supportive specific details, and you'll demonstrate that expository reading involves gleaning outlines and summaries of the text. Session II in *Navigating Nonfiction* describes this lesson, which teaches: "Nonfiction readers read with a pencil. We don't just use a pencil to doodle palm trees around the words. We use a pencil to help us pay attention to the main ideas, to note the way those ideas are developed, and to make those thoughts and ideas *visible*." The lesson goes on to show children how we read a chunk of text, pause to recall content in summary form—boxes and bullets—and then list that information across our hand. The goal is that this awareness becomes foundational to the way your children approach expository texts. In this way, you'd support reading expository texts in their entirety, enabling children to understand the main *concepts* that the text teaches as opposed to an "extractive" way of reading expository nonfiction where 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.

Right away, you will want to alert readers to the boxes-and-bullets infrastructure of expository texts, which is what enables children to ascertain the main idea (box) and the supporting details (bullets). This awareness is crucial to understanding the interconnectedness of ideas within the text—you want to guard against children 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 children 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?” referring explicitly to the text as the basis for answers.

Sometimes it is helpful for children 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. Tell readers that this topic sentence is often the first or last sentence—but not always! You might teach children to read the first sentence of a paragraph and ask, “What is this saying?” and then to 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 children initially to make this underlying boxes-and-bullets infrastructure visible by penciling on a copy of a text to underline or box the main ideas and to “bullet” the supporting details. You’ll want to teach children to break dense swaths of expository text into chunks—either with a pencil or with their mental eye—and tackle these chunks by fishing out and holding onto the main ideas within, rather than being side-tracked by supporting facts and details. At the end of each chunk, children will profit from saying (or writing on a Post-it), “This part teaches me . . .”

After determining the main idea of a passage, children can move to determining the overarching idea of a chapter or two-page spread by noticing whether different sections continue to build on one main idea or whether the sections turn 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.”

As children read across a book, you may want to teach them to look across the main ideas of chunks or sections, asking, “How does this all fit together?” For example, a child may have learned earlier in a book that baleen whales differ from whales with teeth. Then, later in the book, the child learns that baleen whales have a different *diet* than whales with teeth. So, now this reader can identify a correlation by citing evidence from across the book to explain why baleen merely permit a diet of plankton and small fish with teeth allow a diet of larger animals such as seals and penguins. You will want readers to comprehend texts in their entirety, drawing attention to how information at the end of the text builds upon the main ideas presented at the beginning of a book or passage. Correspondingly, your teaching about a *paragraph’s* main idea will extend to a *section’s* main idea, as your children become accustomed to applying the

boxes-and-bullets infrastructure across much larger chunks of text. For more ideas on how to help children locate main ideas and supporting details in expository texts, you might refer to Sessions II and V in Volume I of *Navigating Nonfiction*.

You could teach your children to take notes on a few select pages that seem particularly interesting or particularly worth sharing with their partner. The amount of writing might be just one Post-it for a large chunk of text, where the student draws a box at the top and bullets below. This note-taking helps make their thinking visible to you as you confer with students or walk around your room looking for small groups to pull. It also helps them be prepared in their partnerships to teach each other.

Nonfiction readers 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 children to want to know how to master the structure and organization of texts. You might ask kids to prepare for partner talk by rehearsing how they’ll explain important information they’ve jotted on their Post-its—they might use the text’s pictures and charts, an explaining voice, an explaining finger and gestures. You might teach that when partners meet, instead of just saying what they have learned, they might:

- Point out the details in the pictures or diagrams that highlight what they’re saying.
- Link previous learning to the new information that they just encountered by flipping back and forth to show pictures that build off of one another and by explaining how 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. For example, if one partner is explaining to his partner that owls don’t flap their wings like most birds, but rather they glide, he could have his partner put out his arms and flap them like wings. Then, he could instruct his partner to sway his body, keeping his arms out and still, to illustrate the difference between gliding and flapping.

## **Part Two: Responding to the Text with Reactions and Questions, and Reading On to Draw Conclusions**

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A natural next step to paraphrasing and synthesizing text is to respond to what the text teaches. You can expect children to have ready comments for all the new information contained in expository texts: “That’s weird,” or “That’s cool,” or “That’s

interesting,” or “That’s gross.” Of course, these are just launching points—quick reactions children might have to these sorts of texts. You’ll want them to take such responses further so that they also think and talk about the texts, and grow their own ideas about what they read.

Readers will naturally question the information they are reading in expository texts. “How come male emperor penguins stay alone, keeping the egg warm on its feet for two months, with nothing to eat, while the female leaves to fish in the ocean?” a child might ask. You’ll want to teach your readers to not only read on, seeking answers, but also to think over everything they’ve read so far and everything they already know. In response to his own question, the child might offer as an 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 stance toward their expository texts has greater urgency and meaning for children when it is undertaken collaboratively with a partner rather than in solitude by a lone reader.

These inquiring partner conversations that readers conduct as they explore their topics can fuel their future reading. As they go back to their nonfiction texts, they can read differently because they’ve had the opportunity to have a conversation. They can read holding those conversations in their minds. As Session VII in the *Navigating Nonfiction Volume I* book notes, we can teach children to start a conversation by locating a big idea and then talking back to that idea. Then, we can teach them to use conversational prompts to elaborate on their thinking. By talking long and “talking back to the text” with partners, children can then apply that same type of thinking to their independent reading. The speaking and listening section of the Common Core State Standards calls for students to ask questions to check understanding of information presented, stay on topic, and link their comments to the remarks of others. You’ll want to emphasize this during this part and teach children to explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion they have with partners.

### **Conversational Prompts to Talk Back to the Text:**

- I can picture how this goes. It probably . . .
- This makes me think . . .
- This makes me realize . . .
- I used to think, but now I’m understanding . . .
- Maybe it’s because . . .
- My ideas about this are complicated. On one hand . . . But then again, I also think . . .

## Part Three: Learning New Vocabulary and Speaking Like an Expert

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When reading books on unfamiliar subjects, as is often the case when children take on nonfiction texts, children will encounter many new words. It is wise for a unit of study on nonfiction reading to contain several minilessons designed to help readers tackle challenging words.

Some of this instruction will merely reiterate strategies of the past to help readers hold onto the meaning of the text, such as “substitute the hard word with a synonym and then read on.” You might also remind readers of decoding strategies you’ve introduced in other units of study, such as: “Break up the word into its root, prefix, and/or suffix, and use your knowledge of those word parts to try to figure out what the word might mean.”

Since authors of expository texts often use technical or content-specific words a casual reader isn’t likely to know, it’s important for readers to use strategies that help us persevere and attempt to figure out those words. Understanding these new words is often integral to understanding the content. When these words appear in the text, the author often will define the word outright and explicitly in a marginal glossary feature, or in the glossary in the back of the book. Other times, the word that the author wants us to learn is illustrated or pictured on the same page. By looking to the text features on the page for support, a reader can often determine the meaning of these new content-specific vocabulary words. For example, an illustration that accompanies text that introduces “baleen whales” to a reader will likely have a visual representation of what baleen looks like. Children need explicit instruction to learn to “read” illustrative portions of the text carefully (e.g., photographs, quotes, time lines, charts, and maps).

For third-grade nonfiction readers, it’s helpful to teach concrete ways to notice where in the context of the word the definition is likely to appear. Many nonfiction writers of nonfiction texts leveled J–O will define the word explicitly in the same sentence in which the word appears, or in a nearby sentence. Consider the following lines from *The Yangtze River* by Nathan Olson—they are typical of one way 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.”

As you may have noticed here, the new word is repeated in the second sentence with a definition, “\_\_\_\_\_ are . . .” Another common way that authors define words in context is to offset a synonym in a parenthetical clause within the same sentence in which the word appears. Consider this sentence from *Life Cycle of a Shark* by Bobbie Kalman:

“Most sharks have **streamlined**, or sleek, bodies.”

Other times, the definition will actually come in a sentence before the word, like in this cluster of sentences from *Volcanoes* by Seymour Simon. Sometimes, like in this sentence, the new word will follow “This is called \_\_\_\_\_”:

“Volcanoes are formed when magma pushes its way up through the cracks in the Earth’s crust. This is called a **volcanic eruption.**”

Even when the text makes overt efforts, in context or in text features, to give young readers direct accessibility to unfamiliar vocabulary, children will often resist adopting the new words they see in print. Technical vocabulary, with its infrequent real-world usage, unconventional spellings, and vague pronunciation, is not the most easy or natural for children to incorporate into their own language. You’ll need to urge children to actively adopt the technical lingo of whatever subject they’re reading about, but you will also want to create a classroom environment that encourages this—ask children to think of themselves as teachers and topic experts and create space for partnership conversations around these topics so that children may have the chance to verbally use new content-specific words in a real context. Research tells us that it takes repeated experience with a new word to learn it—people need to hear or read the word, understand what the word is (synonyms) and what it is not (antonyms), put the word in their own meaningful context, and use the word in their own speech or writing. You’ll also want to teach children to choose flexibly from a variety of strategies and use sentence-level context as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase, using known root words as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word with the same root.

## Part Four: Reading a Nonfiction Text Set Critically and Analytically

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After several weeks immersed in nonfiction on a wide range of topics you may choose to challenge children with this final part that asks them to read critically and analytically. To do this, they’ll need to use all of the foundational skills they’ve practiced in the unit so far—synthesizing to determine main idea, questioning and reacting, and figuring out challenging vocabulary. Here, though, children will be asked to read within one topic and look across texts to compare and contrast, rank, and categorize.

You may choose to have children begin by learning to compare, or to think about ways that information presented from book to book is alike. Teach children that as they approach the second book on a same or similar topic in their basket, they can flag places in each book where it seems as if the information is the same, or similar. They can draw a quick sketch or write a key word on the Post-it flag in each book to remind themselves of what they thought was the same. For example, if reading Simon’s book on volcanoes, a reader might flag a page where he writes about the effect that volcanoes have on people, where it shows a picture of volcanic lava encroaching upon a house with the fact, “In an eruption in 1986, a number of houses were threatened by the quick-moving lava.” Then in another book on volcanoes, *Danger! Volcanoes*, also by Simon, they might flag the fact, “Mount Pelée exploded in 1902, killing 30,000 people in a nearby town.” They could then come to their partnership and talk about the similar idea that’s being presented by both books, and what their own response or

reaction is. The challenging work for students is to not simply flag two identical facts in two books, like the fact “magma is molten lava” in one book and the “melted, or molten, rock is called magma” in another book, but to instead think about *ideas* that are repeated across texts. Here, children will need to draw on their ability to synthesize to determine main idea.

You can also teach children to contrast information within and across texts. For example, perhaps a reader will flag a fact about houses threatened by volcanoes, but then the reader may discover a fact in another book that says, “When a volcano erupts, lava or cinders cover the ground. It looks as if all plants and animals are gone forever. But in a few short months, living things return. Plants grow in the cracks, and insects, birds, and other animals come back.” Their discussion might then contrast the information and they may come up with ideas such as, “Volcanoes aren’t all bad or dangerous, they also help to regenerate the earth.”

If the baskets of topics are a little broader, for example “Disasters” instead of just “Volcanoes,” you might teach children to apply the same compare/contrast skills to thinking across books from a broader topic. They might use phrases or prompts to help them. For example, “With this (disaster), I learned \_\_\_\_\_, but in this one \_\_\_\_\_,” or “With (volcanoes), you \_\_\_\_\_, but with (tornados) \_\_\_\_\_,” or “One thing that’s the same between (volcanoes) and (tornados) is \_\_\_\_\_.”

After a few days of this, you may then choose to move on to teach children to rank, order, and categorize. To do this, children may think about subtopics, or categories, within their larger topics. For example, with volcanoes, kids might think of different categories, such as “effects on people” and “effects on land” and “how they’re formed.” Books with tables of contents can be scaffolds for this, but books without tables of contents can challenge children to use their synthesis skills to create their own categories. Readers can also think in superlative terms: meaner, harder, scarier, more useful, more of a protection, more dangerous, and so on. They can find parts of two or more books that discuss the same category, and be ready to share their ranking system with their partner. It is essential for readers to present their thinking with evidence! For example, children who are reading from a bin of books titled “Big Animals in the Ocean” might talk about killer whales and great white sharks. One child might come to the partnership and say, “Great white sharks are *scarier* than killer whales, even though the whales are called killers. It says in the text that killer whales eat mostly fish and penguins—small stuff. But the great white shark eats sea lions and seals. I think the shark is scarier because it eats bigger prey.”

It will be best to do this work if two children in a partnership are reading and talking about a shared topic. If you’re worried about partners sharing a topic because you don’t have duplicates of your books, rest assured that the only thing required is several texts on a topic; partners don’t need to read the same text. There will be great excitement when one book contradicts another, and this will provide opportunities for you to teach about author perspective and bias, as well as to distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text. Children will also be pleased when one text fills the gaps left by another. This is a perfect time to remind children that their own lives

and areas of expertise function as yet another sort of text. If a reader is knowledgeable about a topic, his own information can contradict, add to, or elaborate on the information found in texts.

## Unit Celebration

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At the end of the unit, partners or individual children who have read many books on a topic can come together and quickly plan a presentation that they'll make to the rest of the class, or to another class, on the shared topic they studied. Children in partnerships might each take one part of their studied topic and teach that part to others. They may make a poster board including diagrams or charts. They may choose to read a part and act it out, or make a model, or put together a PowerPoint presentation. These presentations are meant to be simple and quick but can help solidify what students have learned and add interest and investment to the topic studied.

## 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 off the text, make connections, activate prior knowledge, and so on. You'll want to show children 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. As you read aloud, you may want to organize a chart that shows how readers synthesize and retell the text as main ideas and supporting information/examples. So, if you're reading a book called *Owls' Nests*, you might teach children that they could try to infer the main idea of the text, so far, after reading the first page—and that the system they might use to organize these notes is a boxes-and-bullets one that looks like this:

Owls Don't Build Their Own Nests
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- They move into abandoned nests.
- They live in holes in the ground.
- They live in holes in trees.

There are several ways to make a read-aloud interactive. You might pause at strategic points in the text to nudge children into making an inference, into predicting what happens next, or articulating a personal response. Such participation from children provides

unique and valuable instructional potential as well as the chance to scaffold and manage children's 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 itself. In past units, you employed techniques such as "turn and talk" and "stop and jot," and you can use those here as well. You might also try to subtly teach academic vocabulary and the language of analytical thinking by incorporating those words into your prompts. For example, instead of saying "turn and talk" you might say "turn and teach" or "turn and compare" or "turn and rank" or "turn and define."

Nonfiction texts can sometimes be challenging to read aloud. The density of information packed into every page, and the sometimes didactic nature of books that teach and explain, can make them a bit harder to listen to. It's important to plan more opportunities to stop and engage your children in interacting with the text. In addition, the role of visualizing the information that's being presented cannot be underestimated. You may demonstrate acting out the information as you explain the part you just read before giving children an opportunity to act out a part as *they* explain information to their partner. Having children stop and sketch what you read, adding details to the sketch as you read on, is another way to encourage visualization.

Of course, one of the most important elements of a read-aloud is your own voice. Your intonation alone might clarify the structure of expository texts. For example, as you read, you might use your voice to emphasize main ideas, varying your intonation where support details are suggested. Using fingers, you might count out bullets or listed points.

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 could also choose to preview vocabulary before the read-aloud, especially if you're working with a large number of ELLs. You could write the words they'll encounter on sentence strips with an icon or picture next to them. Before reading the section aloud, you could teach the words by showing pictures and explaining other contexts in which they might encounter those words. Each day you will add a few more words. When you come to the part where these words are found, you will point to them and run your finger under them as you say them and have students repeat after you. You may want to give individuals or partners a word bank that has the specialized vocabulary on it so they can find the words on their own sheets. When children turn and talk, or during whole-class conversation, you will remind them to use their word banks. This way, they are actively using these words not just that day, but across the days that you are reading aloud that book. If you read aloud many books on the same topic, the children will have repeated opportunities to use and learn these words.

You might also help children 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 children 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 those.

Then, partners can meet and explain to each other what they learned, or during whole-class conversations children can reference their diagrams to help them explain, compare, and contrast.

## Additional Resources

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

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

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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### **Part One: Introducing Readers to Expository Nonfiction— Understanding Key Ideas and Details**

- “Although great nonfiction readers are very different, one from another, today I want to teach you that every great nonfiction reader reads with energy, with power. One way that nonfiction readers do this is to 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 . . .’”

- “Today I want to teach you that another way readers can hold onto 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 little summaries of the important stuff. This helps us to recollect what we’ve learned.”
- “Today I want to teach you that as we learn new stuff, we need to add the new stuff onto all that we learned earlier, and then draw on everything we’ve learned as we carry on. It’s like the new tools get added to our existing toolkit.”
- “Today I want to teach you that reading nonfiction is like taking a course in which a person is told a whole lot of new and detailed information. Instead of trying to memorize all that information, it helps to create larger categories to organize that information. That way, as we read, we sort the little bits of information under bigger points, creating a boxes-and-bullets outline that matches the text. It’s almost as if, as we read, we write headings for the texts that don’t have any.”
- “Today I want to teach you that one way readers find main ideas in nonfiction is to look for a ‘pop-out sentence’ as we read. We remember that there is often one sentence that summarizes the content of a paragraph or a passage. One way we might find the pop-out sentence is to read sentence by sentence, asking, ‘How does this fit with what’s been said so far?’”
- “Today I want to teach you that when people read nonfiction books on a topic, we become experts on that topic, teaching others what we know. To teach someone, we need to know the main ideas and the supporting details, and it helps to use an explaining voice and sometimes even to use your face, hands, and whole body to illustrate what we mean. One way to prepare to teach others all we are learning is to jot some notes on a few select pages that seem particularly interesting or particularly worth sharing with a partner.”

## **Part Two: Responding to the Text with Reactions and Questions, and Reading On to Draw Conclusions**

- “Today I want to teach you that readers talk to let texts get through to us, to let texts change our minds. We talk to grow ideas.”
- “Today I want to teach you that whether you are reading nonfiction or fiction texts, it is equally important to talk about those texts with each other, saying, ‘Isn’t it weird how . . .’ and ‘I wonder why . . .’ and ‘Did you notice that . . .?’ But I want to add one more thing. Readers read differently because we’re going to be in conversations later. We read holding conversations in our minds.”

### **Part Three: Learning New Vocabulary and Speaking Like an Expert**

- “Today I want to teach you that nonfiction readers have lots of strategies to draw on when we encounter difficult words in our texts.”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers pay special attention to the technical words that are often used in nonfiction texts. These are words that have to do with the specific topic and are ones that casual readers aren’t likely to know. It is helpful for readers to be aware of different ways that writers use text features to define vocabulary words, such as in the margin or in the glossary.”

### **Part Four: Reading a Nonfiction Text Set Critically and Analytically**

- “Readers, right now, you can choose topics that will become your areas of expertise. To embark on a learning project, you will 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. One way you might do this is to look for places in texts where the information is the same or similar. You can also notice places where texts give information that is different.”
- “Readers, today I want to teach you that one way nonfiction readers grow ideas about an area of expertise is to come up with a system to organize their thinking. We might think about categories, or subtopics, within larger topics. Then, readers share our organizational systems in groups, taking care to present our thinking with evidence.”



## UNIT FIVE

# Mystery Book Clubs

### JANUARY

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: N/O)

As the author of the popular *Cam Jansen* mysteries, David Adler, explains, “Children who are just beginning to read on their own, read slowly. They read every word. But they don’t think slowly. To keep their attention it’s necessary to keep the story moving.” True to Adler’s word, most mysteries written for children have a clear, coherent through-line in a fast-moving plot, so that even your slow readers will be turning pages. This month, your aim above all else will be to nudge children into increasing their reading volume and stamina, knowing that the nature of books they are reading will support your effort.

You might begin the unit by revisiting your start-of-the-year resolution on “reading more,” and you’ll certainly want to track and celebrate volume surges in reading logs this month. You’ll deliver specific instruction around reading faster and longer. You’ll want to catch any readers who still subvocalize the text or use the telltale finger-under-word crutch and gather them together in a small group for specific instruction on fluency and speed. “Readers don’t read one word, one word, and the next word,” you might say. “We move our eyes to read *groups* of words.” You might set readers up to read portions out loud to each other. “Are you wondering what happens next? Show that wondering in your voice. Add *suspense* to your read-aloud.” Volume I in *Authoring a Reading Life* from the new series, *Units of Study for Teaching Reading: A Curriculum for the Reading Workshop, Grades 3–5*, has scores of ideas on how to set the collective class mood for reading with volume and fluency.

You will want to continue supporting your readers’ growing abilities to handle increasingly complex texts. You want to make sure that children are reading books that represent their Point of Opportunity. Matching readers to books doesn’t mean that they’re all reading easy-as-pie texts. It means that they’re encountering that magical mix of challenge and support that ensures engagement. You will probably want to talk up the fact that reading clubs provide readers with the group solidarity that allows each

member to aspire to grow, reaching toward more ambitious goals. One way to do this is to be willing to tackle texts that are more complex and nuanced than many of your students have ever read. If you are moving some readers into challenging texts, in addition to the support of a club, you can also provide those readers with book introductions. Often parents are willing to help out by reading a few chapters aloud to a reader and talking deeply about them—this is very helpful at the start of a book, especially. Parents can help also simply by reading the same book, in sync with a reader, and talking with great interest about the book.

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

Most popular mysteries such as the *Boxcar Children*, *Jigsaw Jones*, or *A to Z Mysteries* come in the form of small books that are part of a larger series. This is a crucial scaffold for beginning readers because books within a series repeat the main characters and even several secondary characters. Also, mysteries that are part of a series tend to follow a distinct problem-solving pattern. After reading one or two *Nancy Drew* books, a reader will tend to know this "titian-haired sleuth" well enough to be able to predict the things she does to solve a case—her peculiar habits or strategies (that she sometimes goes to Dad when all else fails, for example). Similarly, after reading two or three *Encyclopedia Brown* books, readers will come to expect that Encyclopedia will "solve" a case by closing his eyes to think deeply and then asking a single question that will lead directly to the solution. Repetitive characters and plots across a series allow children to predict with ease. Since you've already taught the habits needed to read series and to analyze characters in earlier units, expect children to do this work with greater independence and fluency.

This unit also invites intertextual work. The Common Core State Standards specifically state that readers in third grade need to be able to compare and contrast themes, settings, and plots of stories written by the same author about the same or similar characters. As children read one mystery and then another they will develop a sense for how mysteries tend to go, and if they are reading mysteries within a series, they'll get a sense for a particular series. This means that children can, within this unit, learn to see how any one mystery fits within a set of other, similar mysteries.

You'll probably decide to continue the previous month's book clubs. If you do, you'll find that it is natural for a book club reading a mystery to be engaged in one gigantic enterprise. Readers will try to beat each other in their attempt to be the first to spot that a particular clue is actually a false clue, or try to be the first to "solve" the mystery. Club discussions will naturally be geared toward guessing what the outcome of the mystery will be.

Lastly, this unit will focus on the skill of interpretation by asking students not only to follow the plot and solve the mystery, but to take away life lessons from studying the characters and plot. For example, in the *Boxcar Children*, an overly friendly character

often tricks or fools the children. This is also true in many *Cam Jansen* mysteries. After reading these mysteries, we might say that both books teach us that you can't always trust people just because they are nice to you.

## Part One: Mystery Readers Read for Clues

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You may decide to launch your introductory minilesson of this unit with some drama, staging a mini-mystery in the classroom (perhaps your glasses or the class's pet hamster "mysteriously" disappear). You might provide a clue or two to help children solve the mystery ("I had my glasses on when I left for the teachers' lounge," or "I saw some tiny footprints near the coat closet"). Once you capture children's attention, you'll tell them that they'll be doing the same kind of detective work in their reading this month. One of the first questions to start off a unit on mysteries is to look at the opening scenes in the story to ask, "What is the mystery here?" You'll want to teach readers to identify the main problem (such as the disappearance of an object or person) and alert them to how a main character goes about solving this, usually with the help of clues (such as a coded message or a mysterious footprint in a wet flowerbed under some strategic window) that are revealed along the way. Most mysteries begin with action, and their typically fast plotlines have an inbuilt suspense that keeps readers engaged from the onset. Mysteries are crafted deliberately by the author to contain some inconsistency that allows young readers to "solve" the mystery *before* the detective does. Your readers will feel a sense of urgency as they master the problem-solving nature of these books, and it won't be long before they pick up that mysteries within a series have a way they "tend to go."

Next, to make it clear to children that mysteries usually follow a predictable sequence of events, you'll want to teach them the vocabulary necessary to label the main fixtures common to most mysteries. Readers will need to identify, early on: "Who's the detective? What is the mystery? Are there clues revealed along the way? Is there a suspect? Can I make a list of suspects?" The more mysteries children read, the more skilled they will become in identifying these elements that are typical of the genre. If you wish to do so, there are lots of television shows that can be used as touchstone texts in an effort to teach children how mysteries tend to go. You may want to bring in an episode of a mystery show that your kids like and then use that episode as a touchstone, referencing it often in minilessons. Most of the skills that you will want to teach readers in this unit are skills that can be illustrated with reference to any episode of a mystery series. Similarly, you may want to purchase the old-fashioned game of *Clue* and use that as a touchstone. You can teach readers that just as they needed to keep track of all the possible suspects when playing *Clue*, readers of mysteries do this as well. You might say to children, "We have a list of possible suspects going in our mind, and when we learn new facts, we look back on that list, sometimes eliminating one suspect or another." If you have a SmartBoard you can actually play a game of *Clue* on this to help students follow a mystery as they solve the clues interactively. Skilled mystery readers

make mental, if not physical, lists of suspects. As they're reading, they're on the lookout for information or behavior that seems out of place, and discrepancies that pose opportunities to ask questions such as, "Why would . . . ?" or "How could . . . ?" One way to get your readers to do this work is to ask them to jot down the possible *motivation* that each suspect might have for committing a crime. Urge readers to ask the questions, "Why would this suspect want to do this? What would s/he get out of it?" of each suspect in their list. In addition, they can ask themselves, "Who had the *opportunity* to do this?" and "Who was near the scene of the crime or had access to it?" Readers might do this by jotting privately as they read and then bringing these to the club discussion as club members collectively brainstorm a solution to the mystery.

You will alert readers to the story grammar of mysteries not just to increase their attentiveness to this genre, but also to improve their understanding of narrative structures in general. Readers should already have a basic awareness of the story arc in narrative texts: where a problem is revealed, heightened, and eventually resolved. You might remind children that mysteries are also stories, and that they also need to draw on everything they know as readers of fiction. Most importantly, they need to grow ideas about characters. This, of course, becomes a way to help mystery readers realize that collecting clues and using these to grow theories is not just what one does to solve a crime, but also what one does to grow ideas about characters, too. When reading any novel, for example, we collect clues to think, and we ask ourselves, "What kind of person is this? What powers or talents does he or she possess?" You'll want readers to ask these questions, too, since understanding a character is a way of understanding a big part of the story. For example, you'll want readers of *Cam Jansen* to identify her gift of a photographic memory early on, to understand that this "camera" memory doesn't just account for her name but plays a role in her ability to solve mysteries. Similarly, children will benefit from realizing that *Encyclopedia Brown*, as his name suggests, relies on his powers of an encyclopedic knowledge to crack a case.

Apart from identifying the quirks or powers of the main protagonist, you might urge the empathetic stance you taught in an earlier unit on characters where you showed children that reading meant stepping inside a character's shoes. You might say: "Mystery readers step into the shoes of the detective and search for clues alongside him or her. Put yourself in the detective's shoes. What might *you* do next to solve this mystery?" In the same way, you'll want readers to discuss secondary characters. You might say: "What role does the sidekick play?" or "How does the sidekick help the main character in solving each mystery?" You'll teach readers to make initial theories about characters and add to—or revise—these theories moving forward. If there are possible suspects or a villain that features in the mystery, you'll again alert children to note everything the author tells us about these characters and to note, too, the roles they play in creating or complicating the mystery.

You can teach more features specific to the mystery genre as a way of strengthening comprehension. It will benefit readers, for example, to flip back to earlier pages, once they've read to the end and learned the solution of the mystery, to identify the specific red herrings (false clues) that threw them off course. You'll alert readers to a mystery

author's craft by suggesting that they examine these twists in the plot, asking themselves, "What did the author do to trick me? What did this make me think?" They can follow up this study of the plot's twists to decide, "Now I know—I will not fall for this particular red herring in any future mystery I read." It is true that experienced mystery readers can intuit the solution to a mystery far better than those new to the genre, just because experienced mystery readers tend to recognize red herrings better as they encounter them. Spotting these, in fact, might eventually contribute to half the fun of reading a mystery, once readers come to know this genre well.

Finally, red herrings play a big role in children's ability to anticipate similar craft moves in other narrative genres that are designed to keep readers guessing. That is, once children come to expect red herrings in mysteries and to read books in this genre trying not to fall for these false clues, it won't be long before they make the connection between red herrings and possible twists in plot that exist in other narrative genres such as novels or short stories, adding to their experience and sophistication in recognizing and anticipating authors' narrative craft.

## Part Two: When We Read More than One Book in a Mystery Series, We Expect the Story to Go in a Certain Way

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Since the majority of children's mystery books are part of a series, the major characters and a base setting (e.g., a school yard or a clubhouse) are usually reintroduced in each book. While children will find themselves in familiar territory again and again, especially at the beginning of a mystery, the challenge will be for them to pay attention to *other* settings the crime solver visits. These other settings are often places where the crime solver goes to interview witnesses and therefore are full of clues. You will want readers to know that from the start of the story, they will need to start collecting clues, the pieces that will later help them complete the jigsaw that solves the mystery. Thus, they will want to pay special attention to setting and new characters that each book in a series introduces.

Mysteries that are part of a series are helpful to young readers because of the consistency of the main character and a base setting. In the same way, mystery series aid also in helping children understand the archetypal role of *secondary* characters wherever a detective has a permanent sidekick or two. Inspired by Sherlock Holmes's classic "Watson," the sidekick is often a loyal assistant providing many convenient roles: somebody to bounce ideas off or patiently explain "elementary" clues to (often for the benefit of the reader). In every book in the series, therefore, Nate the Great has the dog Sludge, Cam Jansen has Eric, and Jigsaw Jones has Mila Yeh. Often, the sidekick unwittingly raises a question or points to a feature that leads the main character to have the big mystery-solving "Eureka." Then again, some mysteries, such as *The Boxcar Children* or Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* and *Secret Seven* series don't have *one* main protagonist with a lesser sidekick, but rather a *group* of siblings or friends who serve collectively as a main character unit. Readers will come to anticipate the predictable

patterns, not only of how the mystery tends to be set up and eventually solved, but also of the role that certain repeated characters will play in this process. According to the Common Core State Standards, readers are expected to describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.

It may be that every time you watch *Monk* (or another mystery show), you're dazzled by the way he spots details that turn out to be significant. You see the same things he sees, but you just pass by so many significant details. Great detectives are on the alert, seeing more, and noticing more than the average person. We can use this to teach children the importance of reading more closely, with more alertness. "Mystery readers read suspiciously," you might teach, or, "Mystery readers find clues in the details." Clubs can reread closely, trying to spot additional clues they may have missed the first time. Advise readers to ask themselves, "What did the detective learn that I should have learned?" Urge children to discover the answer to this question by going back to the place the detective realized something that *they* missed. Then, too, encourage children to be alert to the various perspectives witnesses offer. Just like the detective, children will need to sort through all the information and decide whose account (or which clues) they believe. Readers may also benefit from time-lining the crime, especially if (as is typical in mysteries) the crime took place chronologically before the beginning of the book. This sequencing work will also help them "see" the plot as they talk about the mystery with club members. Because characters in mysteries move between present-day action and reflections on the past (when the crime occurred), it is essential that children have an ability to mentally and seamlessly shift between a focus on the current story and on the past to piece together what happened.

If reading is an inferential activity, reading a mystery is doubly so. The work that a detective does in solving a mystery is an apt metaphor for the sort of work readers must do to understand characters and the story. You'll want to teach that skilled mystery readers not only search for clues, they also make something of those clues and use inference to do so. Phrases such as "I think this means . . ." and "I think this could show . . ." are the language of prediction and inference. We can teach readers to point to particular parts of the mystery to infer and predict by saying, "Because of this . . . I think . . ." These predictions are based on the inferences that readers accumulate from the text. Then, too, you could teach children that readers often entertain more than one possible prediction. One important thing that mysteries can teach us is to be flexible readers. Readers need to think about multiple possibilities no matter the genre, and mysteries can help us to do this by holding onto various predictions and rationales for these predictions.

This is a great opportunity to do some shared mini-essay writing in which the children support their hunches with clues from throughout the story. It would be easiest to do this work with the class read-aloud because all along the children have been trying to figure out who did it before the book tells us. So, stopping at a critical point in the story and asking the children to review all of their jottings—as well as the jottings the class has been compiling together to think about the suspects and what proof we have—would support this mini-essay work. You might ask children: "Who might have

committed this crime?" The answer to this question becomes the thesis statement for a mini-essay. You will then coach kids to write in the air about ways to begin our mini-essay. Once kids have shared a few ideas, then the class may pick one and you will write it. For example, the essay might begin, "*In Cam Jansen and the Scary Snake, we figured out that the man stole the purse with the camera in it.*" Then you will ask partners to turn and talk and come up with reasons that support this claim. After that, children would cite specific evidence from the story to prove this is true. They might quote a specific part of the text or summarize a scene, then explain how this evidence supports their claim. They may write, "One reason we know he did it is because he knew the color of the bag before anyone told him. This proves . . ." In this way, children are not only developing hunches and collecting possible suspects, but also providing text evidence to prove their idea. The class could compose more of these for each suspect in the book, or groups could go off and write a mini-essay together. Later, clubs will do this work on their own. They will be encouraged to speak and write in mini-essay when they have suspects and reasons.

Clubs can also write to hold onto their thinking work by making lists of suspects with page numbers that show why they are a suspect. When a child no longer thinks a character is a suspect they might jot down why they no longer believe so to share with their club the next day. Children may jot not only the clues, but also where and how the clues were found, so that when they read their next mystery, they will carry that knowledge with them. Readers might have tips for reading mystery pages that they add to over time to help them become better mystery readers. Let's not forget that children should also be doing character work as they read their mysteries. So they might be jotting traits, observations, and thoughts about Dink, Josh, and Ruth Rose. We also want to teach them how to reread their jottings to see if the way they are as people helps them solve the mysteries or helps us predict how the mystery will go. For example, we know that Josh loves nature and is passionate about protecting it—he hikes, and he owns and uses binoculars to bird watch. Will his keen observation skills and binoculars help him figure out who took the peregrine falcons in *Falcon Feathers*?

### Part Three: Mystery Readers Learn Life Lessons from Our Books

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Many readers may assume that because mysteries are so fast-paced, the only work readers must do is follow the plot and solve the mystery. However, if we're willing to slow down our reading slightly, the characters in our mysteries are constantly teaching us lessons that we could apply to our own lives. It is essential that children learn what is worth paying special attention to. Readers will benefit from looking closely at even the smallest of a character's actions and asking whether these actions are positive or negative. The next step, then, is to step back and ask, "What lesson could I learn from the choice this character made?" In *Jigsaw Jones and the Case of Hermie the Missing Hamster*, we might notice that as soon as Wingnut starts to tear up, Jigsaw has a box of tissues at the ready. And when Wingnut can't afford the \$1.00 payment to Jigsaw, Jigsaw

accepts whatever he can give. If we ask ourselves what lesson we could learn from this, we might say, “When someone is in trouble, you might have to change the rules to help them.” Or we might say, “This is teaching me that sometimes it’s important to be flexible.” From this, children can begin to learn that even the tiniest actions are choices made by a character and therefore reflect beliefs or morals.

Once readers are in the habit of noticing tiny actions and looking closely at them, we may encourage them to look closely at the big, important decisions characters make throughout the story. When characters follow a lead or keep a secret or confront someone suspicious, we might stop and again ask ourselves, “What lesson am I learning from the character *here*?” It helps to think about why the character has made this choice and what it might teach us about life. Jigsaw doesn’t jump to the conclusion that a snake ate Hermie the Hamster even though that is his initial hunch. In fact, when Wingnut gets worried, Jigsaw insists that “he’s only a suspect,” and that they have to keep an open mind. He then decides to do extensive research about hamsters and their predators. If we asked ourselves what this character’s choice has taught us, we might say, “Don’t jump to conclusions about people before you’ve known all of the facts.”

Another time to stop and pay close attention is when a character is having a very strong emotional reaction. It often pays to think about what’s behind this emotion or what is motivating the character to act this way, then think about what lesson the character is trying to teach. In *A to Z Mysteries: The Falcon Feathers*, Josh brought Ruth Rose and Dink to the woods to see the nest of baby falcons he had found a couple of weeks ago but discovered they were gone. Josh reacted strongly and wanted to report the missing falcons. We might ask the readers, “What life lesson can we learn?” Readers might say, “When something means a lot to you, you can’t just stand by and do nothing but rather you need to take action.”

Another place mysteries offer readers the opportunity to think about life lessons is at the end when we know who did it. After we have identified who did it, and after we have figured out why he or she did it, we can think about what we can learn from their motives. Mysteries are moralistic. They are teaching young readers that greed, jealousy, and revenge are wrong. For example, at the end of *Falcon Feathers* we might ask, “What can we learn from Kurt who stole the baby falcons to train them to race so he could make money?” We might say, “When we just think of ourselves instead of others we might end up making bad decisions that could get us into trouble.”

## Helping Readers Tackle Unfamiliar Vocabulary

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This genre has its own insider vocabulary words such as *detective*, *sleuth*, *suspect*, *witness*, *clues*, *motive*, and *red herring*, to name a few. You will want to encourage clubs to adopt this vocabulary for use in their discussions. This specialized language is a way for children to adopt the basic premises or concepts that define the *elements* of a mystery story and to use these concepts efficiently in their talk. Without active knowledge of these basic conceptual words, club members’ discussions will be clumsy and under-

developed. Imagine the conversation between teachers who aren't familiar with the basic jargon of their subject—if we had no mutually understood, specific words for basic concepts such as instruction, strategy, skill, differentiation, assessment, for instance—how long-winded and ambiguous our communication would tend to be! For this reason, you might make a prominent display chart of the words or concepts you expect your mystery readers to know and use while talking in their clubs. Many teachers find it helpful to also build vocabulary around criminal motives, charting words such as “jealousy,” “revenge,” “greed,” and so forth. You may find other vocabulary groupings to chart, depending on the ways in which you teach this unit and on the sophistication of the books your children are reading.

Also, if there are readers in the room who are not yet adept at reading independently for prolonged stretches of time, you'll want to equip them, in particular, with a repertoire of decoding strategies. You might say: “Sound a word out to hear it said aloud before you try to guess its meaning. Read around the word for context clues. Try to insert a synonym or a placeholder in the word's stead and continue reading. Be alert to prefixes, suffixes, root words . . .” Of course, the advice you might give your readers to help them figure out a hard word is as important as you actually demonstrating how these strategies might look when you model them actively in your teaching and your read-aloud.

During read-aloud, you might use phrases crafted to prompt student thinking, such as:

- “That's weird! Let's reread, paying close attention to the description of this character.” Then, “Turn and tell your partner what's so weird.”
- “Oh my gosh—I think that's a clue! Turn and talk—what clue do we have and what might that mean?”
- “Let's figure out what's really going on: Partner A, be Jigsaw, and Partner B, be Mila. Act out this scene—now talk about what's *really* going on.”
- “This changes everything! Now who do you think did it?”
- “How does this part fit with your theory of who did it?”

## Additional Resources

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This unit is right for your readers if they would benefit from reading more closely and inferring as they read. For many of your third graders, the move toward “reading between the lines” is one that needs explicit instruction. Left to their own devices, many young readers might move happily over the surface of the plot, surprised by what happens, and often delighted, but not really thinking about why events in the story unfold as they do. This unit aims to entice your readers to think as they read—to pause and make predictions, to gather up clues, to notice what's happening and to think about why things happen the way they do, to revise their predictions—in short, to become deeply involved in

the books they are reading. If you've taught a lot into prediction and inference in previous units, your class may be ready to work on interpretation, finding deeper meaning and life lessons hidden in their mystery books. If you feel that readers still need work paying attention to the tiniest details and using them to make inferences, you can save the interpretation work for the subsequent reading unit on biographies.

For this time of year, grade level benchmarks are around N–O, and fortunately there are many mysteries within those levels. If you have readers who read at dramatically lower levels than those described above—such as E-F-G-H, you may want to look at the first- and second-grade units on dramatizing characters. *It's unlikely that you'll find enough mysteries at these levels for kids to keep their reading volume high within the genre of mystery,* and so the second-grade unit may be more beneficial to your readers. If you have readers within the J-K-L band, but you find that your mystery library is not substantial enough to sustain them throughout the month, children could read mystery books in school while reading a separate independent book of their choice at home. Keep an eye on their volume and make sure they are getting plenty of reading done.

For all your readers, you'll want to watch their reading volume as they are in clubs. Most of your readers, if they are reading at N–O, will be finishing a book every other day or so, so you'll need plenty of mysteries to keep them going. You may find that you need to invite your readers to keep an independent reading book going on the side to satisfy their reading life. This method also helps with kids who read at different rates, so that your swifter readers aren't slowing down their reading to await club members.

Aside from reading volume, your primary concern in this unit will be that kids are not only predicting, but also then comparing their predictions with what actually happens in the books they read. You may find that you need to coach them in jotting down their predictions, marking places in the book where they come upon clues, and in holding onto their Post-its so that they can reflect on how their thinking matched what happened in the book. These Post-its will serve as a great assessment for you as you tailor your instruction to your class's specific needs. If you notice that the predictions are vague and generic, you might teach students to be more specific about their predictions, using character names and detailed events on their Post-its. If kids' predictions name a specific outcome of the book, you might coach students to not only jot what will happen but also how this will come to be. Or, if your readers are already adept at making specific, long-term predictions, you could coach them to think of multiple ways this story could go based on the main character, other books in this series, and their knowledge of the genre. Essentially, you'll want to not just think about whether your readers are predicting or not, but instead notice the level of sophistication within their predictions.

Observe how readers use their Post-its and jottings when they get ready to talk to their clubs as well. If readers are bringing Post-its to club conversations that lead to dead ends, you may use "mentor Post-its"—or sophisticated Post-its crafted by you or other children—to show clubs how some jotting can lead to rich discussions. Watch if they go back to specific pages in their books and see if they reconsider their thinking as a result of their conversations. If your kids need some propping up in their club conversations, you might find the teaching in the third-grade series unit helpful.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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### Part One: Mystery Readers Read for Clues

- “Mystery readers start our books wondering, ‘What’s the mystery?’ We read the first few pages trying to identify the main problem. Next, we ask ourselves, ‘Who’s the main detective? Is this main detective one person or a group of persons?’ Then, we read deeper into the book, paying attention to the clues this main detective finds.”
- “Mystery readers often step into the main detective’s shoes, almost solving the mystery alongside this character. We try to see whatever the main detective might be seeing, consider all the clues, and keep guessing solutions, almost as if we were the main detective ourselves.”
- “Mystery readers read for clues. We notice and think about all of the information that we are getting and saying to ourselves, ‘This might be important because . . .’ This helps us to talk about possibilities for how the story may go.”
- “Mystery readers read with suspicion. We make a list of suspects as we read, and each time a new character enters the story we think, ‘Could this person be responsible? Is this character telling the truth or is he/she guilty?’ We pay attention to the little details in the story that point to whether a character should be on our list of suspects or not. We also think of motives, asking ourselves, ‘Why would this suspect want to do this? What does he or she have to gain?’”
- “Mystery readers retrace our steps if we need to. Just as the main characters in mysteries often go back to the crime scenes to revisit and study clues, we can go back and reread a portion of the story to study the information the author has given us to solve the mystery.”
- “Mystery readers, like detectives, rethink everything. As we read deeper into the book, we consider old clues in the light of new information. We ask, ‘How does what I’m reading now fit with what came before?’ Often, we revise our predictions because the story shows us a new angle or clue that we didn’t know previously.”
- “Sometimes a mystery reader sees more than the main detective does. We almost want to shout to the main character to ‘Look out!’ or ‘Pay attention!’ It’s at moments such as these that mystery readers become detectives ourselves.”

- “Although mystery readers can often sniff out a false clue, sometimes the author tricks us with a red herring. We consider the specific red herrings (false clues) that threw us off course, wondering, ‘What did the author do to trick me? What did this make me think?’ We vow, ‘Now I know—I will not fall for this particular red herring in any future mystery I read!’”

## **Part Two: When We Read More Than One Book in a Mystery Series, We Expect the Story to Go in a Certain Way**

- “Readers begin a new book in a mystery series expecting to see familiar faces and places. We know that many mysteries in a series follow a familiar pattern. They often begin in the same place, and they have characters who repeat so that after a while, these characters start to feel almost like old friends. When we read a third and fourth book in a series, we come to know the main detective’s habits and strengths, and we can sometimes predict how this character will think or behave or the steps that this main character will take to solve a mystery.”
- “Mystery readers pay attention not just to the main detective, but also to the sidekick or friends who helps this main detective. We note that often, while talking to this sidekick, the main detective comes up with new solutions. As we read many books in the same series we note whether the sidekick changes across books or stays the same. For example, sometimes the sidekick seems to grow smarter with each new mystery or sometimes the sidekick surprises us by acting in an unpredictable way. We wonder what it means when this happens.”
- “Just as detectives often solve a mystery with the help and intelligence of their friends, mystery readers, too, ponder about our books with other mystery readers. When we talk to other mystery readers, we often use the language of prediction. We start off our sentences saying, ‘I think this means . . .’ or ‘I think this could show . . .’ Sometimes, we use the language of wondering or questioning and we begin our sentences with ‘How could . . .?’ or ‘Why would . . .?’”

## **Part Three: Mystery Readers Learn Life Lessons from Our Books**

- “Mystery readers can learn a lot by studying the choices that characters in our books make. The small choices that a character makes don’t just define that character, they can also guide the choices we make in our own lives.”
- “Mysteries teach readers many valuable lessons about life. Whenever we solve a mystery, we learn something new about human nature. We ask ourselves, ‘Why would this person do this thing?’ Often the answer is ‘greed,’ ‘jealousy,’ ‘revenge,’

or some other negative motive. Mysteries teach us that crimes don't remain unsolved and that negative motives are often found out and punished."

- "Reading mysteries teaches us to be curious in our own lives. Mystery readers become trained to look for clues and details in our real lives that tell us more than someone else might see. We notice and think more deeply about things someone else might pass by and solve problems in our own lives by rethinking and pondering these.



## UNIT SIX

# Biography Book Clubs

FEBRUARY/MARCH

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: 0)

“**N**arrative nonfiction is not an accidental genre. Like all writing, it is deliberately crafted for a specific effect, and you will be hoping that readers experience that effect—that narrative nonfiction works its magic on your young people. There is a reason why we remember the teacher who made history sound like a story, why we remember that book that told of the Normandy invasions with the momentum and gravity of a tale, not a textbook. There is a reason we empathize with Helen Keller and with Anne Frank. This is the genre that makes information *experiential*, allowing readers to experience the suspense and drama of history, allowing readers to live through encounters with the world around us” (*Navigating Nonfiction*, Vol. II). And if this isn’t reason enough to devote exclusive teaching time to narrative nonfiction, one needs only remember the importance of this genre for both college and career readiness—or the Common Core State Standards, which stress “biographies” as important tools for engagement in and understanding of nonfiction.

To start your third graders off for a month of reading biographies, you’ll tell them that this month is a return to nonfiction but in a different structure. This time, the texts will be stories—about real people who have done remarkable things, many of whom have changed the world. You will want to convey to your readers that when readers study biography, we read to learn about the adversity these people faced and how they handled that adversity. We read to learn not only about the one person the book is about but also the group of people that person represents and the groups of people that person impacted. That is, we read biography not only to learn about specific famous figures, but also to learn about the world in which we live.

You will find that this unit is aligned with the Common Core State Standards, which emphasize that to prepare themselves for college and career, students will need to gain proficiency in reading a variety of informational texts, including biography. Additionally, the Common Core State Standards advise that students be immersed in a topic for an

extended period of time—and this is a month-long investigation. The NAEP also suggests that children be made familiar with biographies, since standardized tests continue to include an increased volume of informational passages.

As with all units of study, the primary goal of this unit is to help children become stronger readers. The main objective is not to learn content, but rather to learn *how* to read the genre of biography. You will emphasize reading skills above all else. That is, this unit is not about memorizing every detail of this remarkable person’s life, but rather using story grammar to **determine importance**, to **synthesize**, and to **analyze critically** across long stretches of text, ultimately growing theories about them. To teach these skills, this unit draws directly on Part Two of *Navigating Nonfiction* from the *Units of Study in Teaching Reading*. It also stands on the shoulders of the character work included in *Following Characters into Meaning* from the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*.

## Preparing for the Unit

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To prepare for this unit, you’ll want to build up a library of biographies. Pick a variety of people to cover: figures in American history (Washington, Lincoln, Pocahontas, Tubman), sports stars (Babe Ruth, Muhammad Ali, Magic Johnson), scientists, inventors, pioneers in a new field (Einstein, Edison, Earhart), and also authors, artists, singers, activists, and any other person who has accomplished enough that their story has been deemed worthy of being documented and published. Keep the heroes of your most reluctant readers in mind—is there a sports star or a singer that your students love? Luckily, you have endless choices. Bookstores abound with a range of biographies at various reading levels, or they can be preordered online. If funds limit your options, you might find educational websites such as PBS or Scholastic to download biographies from.

You’ll want to keep an eye on reading volume. It is not enough for students to read one or two biographies and move on—to truly immerse themselves in this genre and internalize its unique characteristics, readers will need to read as many biographies as they can comfortably fit into the month. At the same time, you’ll want to supplement with other forms of fiction and nonfiction to ensure that students are “in books” at all times, maintaining a steady volume of reading. Even if you have enough biographies in your class library to ensure that students can meet their daily reading requirement the entire month by reading biographies alone (and this will be rare), you might *still* want to support your readers’ biography muscles through *expository* texts. For example, a reader of Abraham Lincoln’s biography will benefit from reading informational texts about slavery or the Civil War, a reader of Gandhi’s biography might supplement understanding by referring to a side-text on Indian history and decolonization, and a reader of Magic Johnson’s biography might want to look at expository texts on the history of basketball. You might keep such “reference texts” handy, recommending that readers use them to grow an understanding of characters’ times and social situations.

Another way to keep your students “in books” is to encourage their side reading of *fiction* and to encourage them to note how both fiction stories and true biographies revolve around a character’s struggles and growth.

Yet another option to help readers maintain a steady volume of reading this month is to hunt for *historical fiction* at comparable levels as the biographies students are reading. If a historical fiction novel is set in the same era that their biography character lived, readers will benefit from the additional support. For example, a reader of Anne Frank’s biography will understand this character better by reading historical fiction set in World War II Europe, just as a reader of Martin Luther King Jr.’s biography will appreciate his leadership role in history far more by reading historical fiction that provides additional insight into the civil rights movement. You might create a list of “recommended historical fiction readings” for a few high-profile biographies in the library to enable readers to deepen their understanding of the particular political and social era through which each of these famous persons lived.

For the very last part in this unit, you’ll want to make a collection of narrative non-fiction texts other than biographies. This could include books that tell the stories of inanimate objects (such as a piece of coal that becomes a diamond or a cocoa bean that becomes chocolate), texts that tell true stories of events in history, and articles about more recent events.

While you gather resources for children to read, you should also look for texts to read aloud to your class. Just as children will be independently reading multiple biographies to truly get a sense of the genre, you will want to read several biographies aloud. You should aim to read three to five texts to your children across the month. You might choose to begin with simpler biographies, perhaps picture books or short texts, to quickly immerse children in the genre. Then you will want to show children how to navigate longer texts, determining the information that is critical and must be held onto as the story unfolds across pages and across chapters. Be sure to have one biography that is a chapter book, though you might select a shorter chapter book so that you can complete the reading of the text during the time you have planned for this unit.

This unit will be the second round of book clubs for your children and a valuable time to teach children to engage in deeper peer conversation. The Common Core State Standards state that students should engage in a range of conversations with a variety of partners on topics and texts, so that they are given the opportunity to express their ideas clearly and build on the ideas of others. In this unit, students will learn to prepare themselves for conversation by reading and studying texts, generating ideas to bring with them that draw on both their reading and other background knowledge. You might decide to give students chances to explore and grow their ideas through discussion. You will teach children to talk longer, to use each other to push their thinking, and to create and discuss theories about their reading. However, your teaching in this unit will focus less on the management of clubs—the children have been in them for a month—and more on how to use the group to push their comprehension of the text and their understanding of the world.

This unit takes on extra weight because, for most teachers, this is pretest season. The data from thousands of readers in New York State have shown us that there is tremendous correlation between the level of text difficulty that a student can handle and that student's success on standardized tests. So this is a good time to reassess your readers, moving anyone who might be ready to a higher level of text-difficulty, and making sure that readers who are approaching the next level but aren't there yet have transitional book baggies that contain some books on their current level and some on the level they're approaching (with scaffolds for the latter such as book introductions, partnerships reading the same text, or reading multiple books in a series).

## Overview of the Unit

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The unit begins with the important distinction between narrative and expository texts. Through the first part, you'll want to lay down the foundational reading skills that will help immerse your readers in this new genre. You'll call attention to reading speed and volume. You'll also tell students that while biographies "teach" in the way that all non-fiction texts do, they require us to use our fiction muscles, our knowledge of a typical "story arc," so that as we read we are connecting cause-and-effect events in a character's life to understand his or her life trajectory.

In the second part, you'll want readers to examine the unifying idea or message behind a life story, learning as they do that a biography is often a commentary on society at large. As readers do this deeper work of examining the implications of the life choices that the subject of their biography has made, their reading will tend to be more interpretive.

In the final part, and in alignment with the Common Core State Standards, you'll want to use all that readers have learned about biographies to ease them into understanding the structures and patterns of other forms of narrative nonfiction. You'll teach the templates of an "achievement" versus a "disaster" story to increase their ability to predict unfurling plotlines in various narrative nonfiction texts. Furthermore, you'll teach that the protagonist in a "true story" may not always be easily recognizable because instead of being a predictable (human) hero or heroine, this protagonist might instead be a plant, an inanimate object like a volcano, or a collective entity of persons, such as the "Vikings" or the "Sioux." Readers will learn to apply the idea of story arcs to these unlikely "characters."

To end the unit, your readers might choose to write about a particular biography or story that resonates with them and to explain how and why it does. This small writing task will mark our celebration of the way narrative nonfiction can change how we look at the world.

## Part One: Biography Readers Bring Forward All We Know about Reading Stories

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It is wise to start the unit by teaching readers to recognize the genre they will be reading for the month. Taking cue from Session VIII in *Navigating Nonfiction* from the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*, you might begin by teaching children to recognize how narrative and expository texts differ: for example, that one provides information in boxes and bullets while the other flows like a story, telling a series of events in the order they happened. “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!”

Next, you will want readers to apply all that they know about reading fiction to their reading of biographies, aligning with the Common Core State Standards. Remind them that like most fiction stories, biographies center around a main character whose life story contains challenges and struggles. The character generally combats or overcomes these, and in the process he or she grows and learns a valuable life lesson. Apart from reteaching the story arc, you’ll want to tell your biography readers to pay attention to their character’s traits and sources of motivation, just as they did while reading fiction. Teach children to study the daily actions of the subjects of their biographies and ask, “What does this tell me about her as a person?” Then too, readers often study the relationships that these people have, asking, “Who is in this person’s life? How does that impact this person?” It is important to note that both positive and negative relationships affect the people we are studying. We push ourselves to continually think about the people in our books, asking, “What am I now learning about her as a person?”

Another lesson that you want to carry over from previous units is to remind students to heed their reading speed and volume. Encourage them to read long and strong, allowing the story of a person’s life to create an uninterrupted mental movie in their minds. Remind them to log the total number of pages read each day, pushing them to read not two or three but many biographies this month and to log each title. Now, and throughout the month, you’ll also want to insert tips for decoding hard words. Remind students that when we read with speed and momentum, we don’t let unfamiliar words throw us off course. Instead, we carry the meaning of the larger sentence to guess a synonym that might work as a placeholder for this word, and we read on.

Once your children are immersed in a biography, call their attention to the fact that, like expository nonfiction, biographies are written to teach. That is, these texts will provide lots of information on a topic, and readers learn this information as they read. Teach children to pay attention to details such as historical and political references or the descriptions of places and events, reminding them that these details are true and can be verified against informational texts on the same era. For example, a reader who

encounters a reference to the Montgomery Bus Boycott or the “I Have a Dream” speech while reading Martin Luther King Jr.’s biography can be taught that these events will pop up in *many* nonfiction texts connected to the civil rights movement.

Of course, this also means that readers need to carry forward all of our prior knowledge on that topic and use it to make meaning out of the text currently in our hands. For example, while reading the biography of a famous Native American such as Sacagawea, a reader can think, “I’ve read other books on Native American tribes and history,” and can draw on that prior experience with texts about similar topics to anticipate this text’s contents and references. Or if children are reading the story of a famous dog, like Balto, they’ll access their prior knowledge about dogs and especially any knowledge they may have about sled dogs or Alaska. You will want to show students that book clubs provide a chance for students to activate this prior knowledge and apply it to their new findings. Book club discussions provide opportunities for students to express their ideas, agree and disagree with their group members, and revise their thinking.

After this, you’ll want to draw readers’ attention to the setting—the historic time and place in which their character lived—since they are likely to be reading about characters who lived in different times or places from their own. You might say, “These people may live differently than the way we are used to, so we need to read looking carefully at details, gathering information about their daily lives.” You might prompt students to ask themselves, “What am I learning about this person’s life? What was their day-to-day existence?” Then too, you might suggest students compare this daily life to their own, thinking, “What in this book is similar to or different from contemporary society, or my life in particular?” Often as children study the actions of those they are reading about, they will respond to their actions as children of today. That is, if the subject of their biography lived during a different time period, then her actions are shaped by that time period, but children will think about their responses to events as though these people lived in contemporary society. These are moments for clubs to catch each other, saying “That wouldn’t have happened then because . . .,” or “You’re thinking about yourself! Step into her shoes and . . .” Book clubs will offer students the opportunity to push their conversations, thinking about a text for longer periods of time and exploring ideas with more depth.

Once readers are well into their first biography (or perhaps into their second one), you can deepen your earlier teaching about the story arcs we find in biographies. Teach readers to pay special attention to factors and events that trigger a character’s decisions. Remind them to ask the question, “How does whatever is happening now in this story connect with what came before?” Or, “How does this event follow from a previous event or factor in this character’s life?” New York State tests often feature questions requiring readers to trace sequences of cause and effect. And according to the Common Core State Standards, students need to analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text. Studying the trajectory of biographies will give students the opportunity to do this work. Explain that many biographies are tales of achievement: “The trajectory of such tales is predictable,” you might say. “A person shows great promise at a young age or is affected by something in childhood and then,

despite obstacles, the person grows up to do something remarkable—to achieve something meaningful.”You can encourage students to approach such texts expecting to follow that person’s path toward achievement. They will investigate how the subject of their biographies interacts with others and with their environments, and how they come to face challenges or obstacles, which they usually overcome. 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 can be taught to recognize that a character’s response to those events often reveals his or her traits. You may also decide to teach students to turn to these critical moments during club conversations and to reread important sections, studying the language and thinking, “What does this section make me think?” Children can also learn to push each other’s thinking by exploring the other side of an argument. They might say, “On the other hand . . .” Students will benefit from clubs, because they will have the opportunity to strengthen and shift their ideas through conversation, which aligns with the Speaking section of the Common Core State Standards.

## Part Two: Biography Readers Not Only Follow a Life Story, We Also Learn to Grasp and Grow Ideas

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It will be relatively easy for your readers to follow a person’s life story as a series of events, and even to read a little deeper and uncover cause-and-effect patterns—but to understand this genre fully, readers need to be able to pick out the big message that a person’s life offers to the world. After all, you’ll want to tell students, “There is a reason that this person’s life made it to the press. This isn’t a story about a guy who watched TV all day, eating chips and swatting flies and going to the mall. If somebody decides to write a biography, it is usually because the subject of the story did something big enough for the world to sit up and take notice.”

You might pick a few titles to use as examples as you teach readers to note the message a character’s life offers us. “The people featured in these biographies are movers and shakers. Elvis was no ordinary singer—he popularized a new kind of music that even after his death still affects the way singers sing and dance. Amelia Earhart was no ordinary woman and no ordinary pilot. She was the first aviatrix to fly solo across the Atlantic. Harriet Tubman was extraordinary not just because she overcame a terrible situation by escaping slavery, but because she then was able to help hundreds of others do the same.” You’ll want to urge children to think about the big achievement of the characters in their books, asking, “Why has this person’s life story made it to the press?” Next, you might ask readers to think about the particular bold choices the character made to accomplish this big thing. In other words, teach children that it isn’t enough to say that Earhart, Presley, or Tubman were all brave and determined—they certainly were these things, each in their own right—but to cite *specific instances* in these people’s lives that demonstrated true courage or persistence or personal risk taking.

This work also creates an opportunity to broaden and add nuance to students' vocabularies by introducing the subtle yet significant differences between words like *determined* and *persistent* or *courageous* and *fearless*. Teach readers to pick the precise word that best describes a specific choice a character made in life. For example, students could say Rosa Parks wasn't just determined, she was a *risktaker* in refusing to give up her bus seat, and Gandhi wasn't just determined, he was *principled* because he stuck by certain moral ideals. Each time a reader attaches a trait to a character, urge her to also cite the specific occurrence that makes her think this about the character, and then to explore which words most precisely describe the character in that moment.

As a next step to deepen their ability to glean bigger ideas from biographies, you might teach your readers that just as it is important to recognize that we learn lessons from the narrative nonfiction we read, we have to understand that narrative nonfiction paints the picture of one person's life to comment on the world at large. Often the subjects of our texts represent a larger group of people in society. In telling the story of one, the author is really crafting the story of many, commenting on history, society, and life in general. You will want to teach readers that as we read our nonfiction we need to think, "Does this person represent a group of people?" If so, we push ourselves to think, "What are we learning about this particular group? What is the life lesson that I am learning from this text?" And often, readers take these life lessons and then use them as the impetus to live life differently. They think about how they wish the world were and how they will contribute to making that vision of the world come true, now that they have read the story of others who made a difference.

Children will benefit from using Post-its in a wealth of ways to support their learning and their talk. As in the character unit, you might teach children to use their book clubs to push their thinking and lift their inferences about the important figures in their biographies. You may want to teach students to use the questions you have been coaching them to ask throughout the unit as platforms for discussion. You can remind your readers to keep track of what they're learning as a narrative progresses and to get ready to talk to their book clubs by rereading their Post-its, saying what happened in the story and what the story has taught them so far. You might even introduce time lines as a way to track events and the subject's reactions to those events or to track decisions and the effects of those decisions. Using Post-its in these ways supports readers in synthesizing information and growing ideas into theories. You may wish to review the Character unit of study for additional prompts to help children talk more effectively about their ideas.

### **Part Three: Readers Know that Biography Is but One Form of Narrative Nonfiction**

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In the first two parts, you eased your students into reading narrative nonfiction through its most accessible form: biography. Since biographies read like stories featuring a main character, they are fairly straightforward to follow—readers bring all their fiction-reading

muscles into play. Toward the end of the unit, though, you'll want to tell readers that biographies aren't the only form of narrative nonfiction—that any true story qualifies as being narrative nonfiction and that a chronological account of any event (such as a war or a revolution—or a baseball game) is also narrative nonfiction. Readers need to know that narrative nonfiction can take many forms, from newspaper articles that cover a “story” to their social studies textbook chronicling the time line of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

You'll want to start this part, therefore, by reteaching children to recognize narrative nonfiction when they see it. You might clarify that “narratives” involve time, a first/then/after that/next/finally sequence of events. Teach children to ask, “Does this narrative qualify as nonfiction? Or has the author added characters or details from his or her own imagination?” (If the author has added fictional characters or embellished actual events with fictional details, then the text is historical fiction and not narrative nonfiction.) Not all texts are easy to brand as narrative nonfiction texts—many are hybrid in structure, with swaths of narrative text interspersed with expository. You might decide your readers are advanced enough to analyze the architecture of hybrid texts. If so, you might teach that readers are prepared to encounter texts that contain both narrative and expository segments, and that we need to switch our reading muscles accordingly. For example, a passage describing the voyage of Columbus across the Atlantic will tend to have a narrative structure (it will tell a story of all that happened), but it might also contain an expository paragraph or two (for example, three bullets evidencing the claim that no one wanted to finance Columbus's voyage). You might use the two associated graphic organizers—a time line versus boxes and bullets—to illustrate the structural difference between these two kinds of texts.

Next, you might call readers' attention to the fact that while many narrative nonfiction texts are not biographies, they *still* feature a central character. Readers will need to look closer to identify that a text that tells the story of a plant (as in the mentor text *Cactus Hotel*) or an inanimate object (e.g., a volcano or a continent) is not expository, because it relates a time line of events that happen to this plant or volcano or continent. This is a new concept for young readers to take in, since many are used to the hero or heroine of a story being human or at least human-like (e.g., animals with names and personified characteristics, like Sewell's *Black Beauty*, are easy to think of as characters while a plant or a country is not). Often a “character” in narrative nonfiction might even comprise a *group* of people that function as one, such as the “colonists,” the “members of the Underground Railroad,” the “Sioux,” or the “voyagers.” You might demonstrate this by reading aloud a couple of such texts. Ask children to pick out who or what the text is mostly about and to think of this as the “main character.” Session IX in Volume II of *Navigating Nonfiction* from the *Units of Study* chalks out one possible direction for this instruction using *Cactus Hotel*, a narrative nonfiction picture book that will feel deceptively like expository to many young readers.

It will be helpful to provide readers with a template through which to look at narrative nonfiction. “Most true stories are either tales of achievement,” you'll tell them, “or they're tales of disaster.” You could teach readers that achievement and disaster stories follow a predictable pattern, and each provides its own lessons. Achievement stories,

which include most biographies, typically document a path where a character (or a society) faces a challenge, takes risks, and makes critical choices to overcome this challenge. Disaster stories, such as the story of Pompeii or the *Titanic*, are often written so that history isn't forgotten and that mistakes aren't repeated. You'll want to encourage children to study these two templates and make their own theories of what characterizes an achievement or disaster story—refer to Session XI of *Navigating Nonfiction* for guidance on how to do this.

Next, you might teach readers to read for the underlying ideas in narrative nonfiction. Remind them that, "Stories are told for a reason. When we uncover this reason, our understanding of the story takes on a whole new level." Since narrative has a natural flow, you will want to teach readers to hold onto big trajectories in such texts rather than simply fact-mining "to get notes." Encourage them to ponder instead, "Why was this story worth telling? What lesson does it impart? What does it serve as an example of?"

Yet another way of determining a narrative text's big unifying theme is to study a big choice a character makes during a crucial time. Historical texts, especially, usually focus on the choices that a leader or a collective society makes, for example, to raise a voice for the oppressed, to fight for a right, to take a risk by following a dream, or to challenge the government. Thinking about this crucial choice, its transformative effects, and the bravery required to make it helps readers take away the big message that a narrative text offers. Since the genre is nonfiction after all, knowing that these choices were real makes their effect and their message all the more powerful. Readers will read the stories of societies that chose passive resistance over violent war, of peoples that fought for liberties, of leaders that chose one path over another, and know that these are actual historic choices that pave the way for whatever liberty, bravery, and courage has come to mean in the world of today.

For the celebratory end to the month's work, readers might choose one biography or other narrative nonfiction text that resonates most for them and write about how the big message from this text has implications for their own life. Teach that reading narrative nonfiction often affects our own personal decisions so that we go through a critical choice, thinking "What would Rosa Parks do?" or "Would Magic Johnson have given up now?" You may want to create a chart of prompts to guide students toward thinking about life lessons. The chart might include prompts such as:

- I learned from (person) that sometimes people . . . but instead, people should . . .
- I learned from (the person) that in life, it is important to . . .
- (Person) changes from x . . . to . . . y . . .
- Even if you . . . , you should . . .
- Don't forget that even if you . . . , you should . . .
- (Person) teaches us not only about . . . , but also about . . .
- When I first read about (person), I thought . . . but now I realize . . .

Readers might develop these prompts into small literary essays and, if your community of readers is a close one, read these aloud to each other. The big lesson of this unit of study might just be that narrative nonfiction affects the way we live our lives, knowing that these people before us faced life with all its toughness and unjustness but came through shining. Their stories are worthy of being told, retold, and carried forward.

## Additional Resources

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

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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### Part One: Biography Readers Bring Forward All We Know about Reading Stories

- “Today, I want to teach you that readers can identify biographies from expository Nonfiction because the first category is not all about a topic. Instead, a biography is the story of one person’s life.”
- “Today, I want to teach you that because biographies are stories, we can use all we know about reading fictional stories to read biographies. That is, we know that as in fiction, a biography, too, has a central character. This character, called

the “subject” of the biography, often wants something but something else gets in the way. This means that the subject often struggles and faces hardships to achieve it.”

- “Today, I want to teach you that just as we did with fiction stories, readers go through biographies trying to understand and develop a theory about the main character, the subject. We ask, ‘Who is this person?’ We pay attention to the decisions he or she makes to understand the subject’s specific traits. We also study this person’s relationships and ask, ‘Who is in this person’s life? How do those people impact this person?’ We expect the person to have both positive and negative relationships. How this subject tackles these relationships teaches us about him or her as a person.”
- “Today, I want to teach you that biography readers learn a lot about history from studying the times and rules of the society in which the subject of a biography lived. We pay attention to details of place, time, and people’s behavior to understand how the person’s time differed from our own. We think of time and place as it impacts the person.”
- “Today, I want to teach you that as we read, we constantly ask ourselves, ‘How does what is happening now connect with what came before?’ We know that there is a sequence of cause and effect in the subject’s life and that things that happened earlier in this person’s life will influence the decisions he or she will make later.”

## **Part Two: Biography Readers not only Follow a Life Story, We also Learn to Grasp and Grow Ideas**

- “Today, I want to teach you that biography readers ask, ‘What important achievement or qualities made this person’s life important enough to be written about?’ We pay attention to the details in the story that show this subject to fall into that category.”
- “Today, I want to teach you that biography readers realize that almost *any* biography subject can be described as brave or determined. To take away big messages from a biography, we study the choices this person makes and try to pick the precise word to describe the specific kind of courage or risktaking that makes this person unique.”
- “Today, I want to teach you that biography readers note that studying a subject’s life and situation provides us with a window into the time and society in which this person lived. We ask, ‘What group of people does this person represent?’ and develop an understanding about the challenges that this entire group must have faced in these times.”

- “Today, I want to teach you that biography readers note that often a subject’s life and time are quite different from our own. We look at the decisions this person made and judge him against the specific circumstances in which he lives rather than analyzing him in our own context. Sometimes, we may take a freedom or a right for granted, whereas the subject would have had to show tremendous courage and personal risk to exercise this right or freedom. We wonder at this person’s pioneering contribution in making these rights or freedoms common to others in later times.”
- “Today, I want to teach you that biography readers are often inspired by a subject’s life. We read asking, ‘What is the life lesson I am learning from this text?’”

### **Part Three: Readers Know that Biography Is but One Form of Narrative Nonfiction**

- “Today, I want to teach you that biography readers recognize other kinds of narrative nonfiction. Usually these are true stories about something that happened in history, something that happened recently, or the story of a person who is not easy to identify as a typical hero. This ‘character’ might be a plant, a thing (like a river or a country), or it might be a whole group of people. Readers of narrative nonfiction know that the main character may not be easy to identify at first, but we ask, ‘Who or what is this story mainly about?’ to figure it out.”
- “Today, I want to teach you that readers recognize that most narrative nonfiction stories are either tales of achievement or tales of disaster. We know that each of these kinds of story have their own patterns and reasons for being written.”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers of narrative nonfiction know that stories are told for a reason. When we uncover this reason, our understanding of the story takes on a whole new level. We ponder, ‘Why was this story worth telling? Why should it never be forgotten? What lesson does it impart? What does it serve as an example of?’”
- “Today, I want to teach you that yet another way of determining a narrative text’s big unifying theme is to study the choice a subject makes during a crucial time. Readers of history pay attention to the difficult choices that make a story worth telling—for example: the choice to raise a voice for the oppressed, to fight for a right, to take a risk by following a dream, to challenge the government, and so on.”
- “Today, I want to teach you that readers of narrative nonfiction read a story and think, ‘How will I live differently knowing that this happened in my world?’ We use the true stories that we read to serve as personal inspiration to be braver, stronger people.”



## UNIT SEVEN

# Test Preparation

**MARCH/APRIL**

**(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: O/P)**

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

The first thing to remember as you prepare students for state reading tests is that the tests are, in fact, *reading tests*. They test the level at which a student can read with strong comprehension, and, in most states, including New York, they test a student's rate as well—the pace at which he or she reads with strong comprehension. In 2011, the level of text that third graders were expected to read and comprehend was higher than ever before. The good news is that much of what is tested is what we teach throughout the year. Students who read at high reading levels with solid reading rates, meaning they read with stamina and fluency, do well. Students who read below grade level, or who read so slowly that they take an unusually long time to finish books and texts, perform poorly on state tests. Thus, the best preparation for state tests is to teach your students to be stronger readers, tackling stamina, volume, and comprehension simultaneously. A major aim of this unit is to support students in bringing forward strategies for each genre that they have been taught throughout the year. And, perhaps most importantly of all, this unit is about supporting students in thinking logically and flexibly and transferring all they know to their test-taking.

## Stamina, Resilience, and Rate

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

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

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

## Scheduling and Structures

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

block and use what used to be the reading workshop times for test prep. Yet other schools substitute test prep or independent reading for some of their social studies work for two to three weeks.

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

## Getting Ready: Assembling Materials for Test Prep

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

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

Look at last year's state test first, and then look to the year before and keep in mind the genres students are apt to encounter on the state test. Here's our assessment of common possible texts for the NYS ELA. If you work in a New York State school, we recommend you visit the NYS ELA website: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/ela/>. See our website, [tc.readingandwritingproject.com](http://tc.readingandwritingproject.com), for levels of passages from previous years' tests.

<b>Previously tested genres for third grade include:</b>	
<p><b>Narrative (Story) Structure:</b></p> <p>Realistic Fiction</p> <p>Folktales</p> <p>Narrative Nonfiction (including Biography and Autobiography)</p>	<p><b>Expository Structure (Nonfiction):</b></p> <p>Information Pieces</p> <p>How-To Pieces</p> <p>Interviews</p> <p>Questions and Answers</p> <p>Letters</p> <p><b>Poetry</b></p> <p>Narrative Poems</p>

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

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

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

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

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

Secondly, students need to be able to read the question stem and predict the answer before looking at the answer choices. This way, as they read they'll do much more smart reading work and won't be seduced by the distracters among the answers. In fact, the first few times students practice, you might choose to not give them the answer choices and instead have them write in the answer and/or circle in the text the part that supports their answer. Students are easily confused by multiple-choice answers (that's the point of the 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, then match their prediction to the answer choices.

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

Begin the work with a prompted read-aloud of one text with partner talk, and then have your students immediately answer the multiple-choice questions. If you start with realistic fiction, choose the easiest text first. Assess students' success. Decide if you need to address what the test is looking for when certain kinds of questions are posed. Do you need to teach your students to determine the meaning of vocabulary words by reading them in context? Do you need to teach them that the main idea or the theme usually refers to a big lesson the character learns or that we learn? Do this again the next day, probably with a prompted read-aloud, or if you think students are ready, with silent partner reading and partner talk as they go. Then do a third day on the same genre, with silent reading and independent work and with small-group work, if you need it, though you may be coaching during this time, and doing some small-group work in extended day. Another option is to make test prep not an isolated act and to have partner work be heavy on Days 2 and 3, and wean until partners meet on Day 5 after they have read and answered the questions. A possible week of test prep might go like this:

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
<p><b>Shared Experience</b></p> <p>Together the class works on reading one text and answering the questions.</p> <p>The teacher leads the class by providing students with prompts and strategies that will help them navigate and hold onto the text, as well as demonstrating through Think-Alouds.</p> <p>Some sections are read aloud while other sections are read together or in partnerships.</p>	<p><b>Heavy Partner Work</b></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><b>Heavy Partner Work</b></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><b>Less Partner Support</b></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><b>Independent</b></p> <p>After a minilesson is given, students read alone (reading the same passage[s] as their partner) and answer the questions.*</p> <p>You will observe and take notes as students read and answer the questions. These notes will inform your small-group instruction.</p> <p>Partners meet afterwards to discuss their answers and how they reached them.</p> <p>You will confer with partners as they discuss the choices they made.</p> <p><i>*As the test approaches, give students time limits that match those of the test.</i></p>

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

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

## Progression of the Unit

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

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

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

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

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

## Narrative

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

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

What was the cause of this event?

What is the same about these two characters? What is different?

Why do you think the character took the action that she did?

Why do you think the author put this minor character in the story?

Which of the following is a detail from the story that explains how the character solves the problem?

*continues*

*Continued*

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/Expository

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If it's a *non-narrative* or *expository* text (including information texts, advertisements, and interviews), readers may expect to pay attention to and infer from the structure, headings, and topic sentences. As they read, students should 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 learn how the how-to object is used or works or what it shows. There may be questions about what items are needed in a step, what to do right after or right before the step. Students may need to consider the main purpose of the article as well as the most important part.

### **Predictable Questions on Non-Narrative Passages**

What is the main idea of the passage?

What is the article mostly about?

What is the purpose of the article?

Why is the author giving this information?

Which detail supports the main idea that \_\_\_\_\_?

What is the purpose of the illustration/diagram?

*continues*

*Continued*

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

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If the text is a *poem*, readers should expect to pay attention to what the big meaning of the poem could be, what the poem is mostly about, or what it demonstrates or teaches. There may be questions about imagery, or the meaning or symbolism of a part or line. Students may have to answer a question about figurative language such as personification, simile, or metaphor. In all texts, for all grades, readers consider the author's purpose, asking themselves, "What does the author want to teach me? What does he or she want me to feel?"

### Predictable Questions on Poetry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Which element of poetry is not found in these stanzas?

What feeling is the speaker expressing in the poem?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Who is talking in the poem?

## Reading a Variety of Texts

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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, then, should focus on using a repertoire of strategies. Teach students to determine the text type and read strategically, holding onto predictable questions for that genre as they read. You'll want to coach your struggling readers with modified strategies, helping them to make sense of what they are reading and not to get too hung up on holding onto predictable questions.

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

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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 onto ideas and to locate details easily when they approach the questions. Grouping information into categories is a much more effective way to hold onto ideas than trying to remember all of the details from the passage.

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

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

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

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

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

## Multiple-Choice Questions

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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 really understand what the question is asking them to do. Don’t let students waste valuable time figuring out question types unless they are proficient at reading the passages. Note that this strategy may not be effective for strugglers, who should just focus on making sense of the passages.

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

## Main Idea Questions

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

the whole passage or to just one part of the passage?" Test-takers should read *all* 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?
- The story is **mainly** about . . .
- What's the **main** problem in the first paragraph?
- In the story, what is the character's **main** problem?
- Where does **most** of the story take place?

## Main Idea Question Strategies for Strugglers

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

## Detail Questions

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

Some detail questions are essentially sequencing questions. While it is not important that students learn all of the different varieties of detail questions, it is important to support their use of accumulation strategies for fiction and nonfiction texts.

As students read fiction, they can hold onto plot details that are related to the main problem. As they read nonfiction, they can look for text structures that have a sequence, such as how-to or cause-and-effect structures.

### **Possible Detail Questions:**

- What does the character do after he goes to the park?
- Which detail best supports the idea that . . . ?
- Which fact from the article best describes . . . ?
- Which event in the story happens first?
- In which section of the article can you find the answer to the following . . . ?
- What does line 4 mean when it says . . . ?
- What happens right before . . . ?
- Which phrase **best** explains how the character felt?
- According to the passage, what happened **right before** . . . ?
- What does this line mean?
- Which event happens **first** in the story?

### **Detail Question Strategies for Strugglers**

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

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

teach students these different question-types. It can be confusing, particularly for strugglers, to think about and attempt to manage multiple question-types. What is important for all readers to know about these questions is that they are about what conclusions a reader can draw from the passage, and that the answers will not be explicitly stated.

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

### **Possible Inference Questions:**

- After reading the article, what could the reader conclude?
- Why did the author most likely include this character in the story?
- What will the characters most likely do next?
- Which event from the story could not really happen?
- The word “degree” in sentence 2 most likely means . . .
- Why did the author most likely write the article?
- What is the main lesson that the story teaches us?
- After reading the passage, what could the reader conclude?
- This passage is most like a . . .
- Why did the author most likely write this passage?

## **Inference Question Strategies for Strugglers**

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This question type can be the most difficult for strugglers. 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, on fiction pieces the reader is often asked about the lesson that can be learned from the story. It is helpful for strugglers to look for the lesson *before* going to the questions, and then look for the choice that matches their prediction.

## **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 the upcoming text points to the fact that it is wrong. Reading is a process of revision. Accomplished readers continually realign

in our minds what we thought the text said with what we are now uncovering. The revision-of-reading work that students do now will influence each successive first-draft on-the-run reading as they go forward. If a student realizes she misread because she imagined that an extraneous detail was the main idea, the next time she reads she'll be less apt to do this. Jotting notes or headings in the margins helps summarize text, so students can quickly refer to those sections rather than reread them, which they won't have time to do. Of course, all students won't necessarily have to do this type of work to be successful. Then, too, you'll want to wean students off of this strategy as they get closer to the test, since they won't have time to do this self-correcting under exam conditions.

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

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

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

## Small-Group Work

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During this unit, you'll want to pull small groups each and every day during independent reading time, not during the test-prep workshop, when you need to be conferring with and coaching students as they read and answer questions. To form small groups, you'll want to review last year's test and do an item analysis for each student, noting his or her strengths and weaknesses. Look for patterns in your students' work on last year's test to ensure you are teaching skills your students really need. In other words, if a student answered a main idea question incorrectly on one passage, look to see if he or she answered other main idea questions incorrectly before putting that student in a small group on main 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 level of passage, particular types of questions, test terminology, short answers, or distinguishing between a good answer and the best answer. Often teachers think they have to use new materials when working with small groups, but in fact, it is possible to reuse passages and questions that students struggled with in the past, teaching them strategies to help deal with this difficulty in the future. That is, the goal isn't for students to be able to answer *a particular* question on *this* test. Rather, the idea is to teach them strategies that will help them tackle *similar* questions on future passages. You can also reuse a passage but create new questions that address whatever it is students do not quite understand. Students may benefit from an additional shared experience or shared reading of a particularly challenging part of the text, or perhaps another shared writing experience for the short responses.

## Read-Aloud

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Your read-aloud will support students' multiple-choice work as well as their listening skills. When you read aloud as part of test prep, choose passages you think are similar to the ones students will encounter on the test, and that can be read in one sitting. The read-aloud will also be different in structure. Focus on getting your students oriented to the text and to their job as readers of such a text, rather than thinking aloud. Prompt readers for their upcoming listening and thinking work, rather than demonstrating this thinking after reading. In years past, the third-grade listening selection has always been a narrative, with five accompanying multiple-choice and three short-answer questions. Read mostly narratives, including realistic and historical fiction, plays, book excerpts, allegorical folktales, and biographies. Help students to read (or 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 that are actually from the last few years' tests.

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

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

Because read-aloud will help students with both the listening selection and the multiple choice, be sure to read aloud each nonfiction genre. Students should expect that a nonfiction text is going to teach them something. In narrative nonfiction they need to use what they know about story (paying attention to characters, including the obstacles characters face, and their achievements), and what they know about nonfiction (looking for the specific idea a text teaches, and how the story demonstrates the idea). You'll especially want your test-prep read-aloud to include narrative nonfiction for grades that will encounter more of this structure. Common passages on the test include sports, historical and scientific figures, and fiction and narrative nonfiction in which the character is an animal.

Similarly, reading poetry aloud supports students' work on the multiple-choice section of the test. Some of the questions you'll want students to think about are: What is

this poem mostly about? What does it teach? What is the big meaning of the poem? Teach them also to notice structure and to recognize and name imagery and figurative language in a poem, and to consider the effect of these.

## Timing Guidelines

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

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

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Number of Passages</b>	<b>Number of Questions</b>	<b>Minutes</b>
3	6–7	35	60

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

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

If you have students who finish really quickly, check their responses. Our data show us that test-takers, strugglers in particular, often read much too quickly. When students miss more than one or two questions, teach them to stop more frequently, thinking about predictable questions for each genre and holding onto 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.

## Things to Work on 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 of the whole of the text and there are questions that ask them to think of a part, a line, or a detail. You might want to put questions in an envelope and on the outside of one side of it write “W” and on the other side write “D.” Students can dump out the questions and turn them over, and then take turns reading the questions and putting them under the “W” (think of the whole of the text) or “D” (think of a detail from the text).

Questions to include in the envelope:

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

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

- What does the word \_\_\_\_\_ most likely mean?
- Which word means about the same as \_\_\_\_\_?
- In the first sentence, the word \_\_\_\_\_ means \_\_\_\_\_?
- Why did the author most likely write this passage?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Students are often asked in the listening section to identify opinions, and many teachers have found it easy to teach kids the words that commonly indicate opinion, such as *best*, *most*, *greatest*, *worst*, and *very*. To support students in understanding opinion statements, it is helpful to teach these outside of the test. It is important that students understand what an opinion statement sounds like because it isn't necessary to understand the passage to be able to get this question correct. You may support students' understanding of opinion statements by giving them a factual statement, like: "Today is Wednesday and we have 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, and New York, and in an envelope put opinion-and-fact statements. Students will sort these into fact-and-opinion piles by looking for the statements that contain opinion words. For example, in the category "movies," students will read a sentence strip that has "*It's Complicated* was the funniest movie of 2009," and would then discuss whether this a fact or an opinion. They would put this in the opinion pile because it contains the opinion word "funniest." But if they pulled the strip that said, "*Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* is a 3D movie," they would put that into the fact pile because it doesn't contain an opinion word.

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

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

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

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

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

## Struggling and Emergent Readers—Decoding

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

When students encounter a hard word to decode or comprehend, they can anticipate what the word should sound like and/or mean, checking what they think against what they see. Make sure they understand how to orchestrate the information. While reading, students should be sure the difficult word *looks right* (relying on 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 importantly, you’ll want to constantly remind your students to be flexible word solvers, using strategies repeatedly, without losing a standard pacing through a text. Once students figure out a word, they need to be taught to reread, putting the word back into context so its meaning isn’t lost. Rereading is indispensable for students who are having decoding issues. On the day of the test, however, it can be problematic for kids to reread because they’ll risk running out of time to complete the passages and questions. Students might have a book in their baggie from which they reread passages or chapters 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

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

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

Use these word walls as you stop and think aloud for the students during read-aloud. For example, you may pause and say, “I imagine Oliver is feeling, let’s see, ‘apprehensive,’ right now.” You may also prompt your students to use these words in their partner conversations during read-aloud—they may talk about how the character is feeling, using words from the word wall. When you do this, you’ll find that students prompt for more categories of words, as they seek words that mean “proud” or “shy.”

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

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

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



## UNIT EIGHT

# Informational Reading

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

### MAY

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: P)

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**I**t's May. You made it. Congratulations! Many of you have the state test behind you, spring is in the air, and there is an entire month in front of you. As we exit a time in the year that is laden with pressure and high-stakes tests, we enter the finale of the year. Chances are that energy and spirits are low for both students and teachers. It would be easy to coast through the next few months into the summer without doing much learning. However, we owe it to ourselves and our students to create a unit that feels fun, not frivolous, and end the year strongly. This unit enables you and your students to embark once again into the rich world of information reading, which, as the Common Core State Standards remind us, is crucial. This means that in this unit, you'll focus not just on conveying the content of study, but teaching the reading skills to learn content successfully. You will invite your third graders to draw on all they know about information reading and note-taking from the nonfiction reading and content area work you did earlier this year.

This unit draws on the year's work in the Content Area Curriculum Calendar. If you taught those units to your third graders, you provided them with a rich background in note-taking and using notes and writing-to-learn strategies as tools to generate their own thinking in a content area study. In this unit, students will have multiple opportunities to grow their thinking while in conversations with others about all they are learning as well as to practice once again key writing-to-learn strategies such as summarizing, comparing and contrasting, and analyzing quotations. To give shape to this unit, we'll look at the New York State suggestion to embark on a country study in third grade, with a specific focus on European countries. Of course, you can substitute content that is relevant to your particular classroom, at this particular time of year.

## Getting Ready: Preparing a Research Library

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You'll need to gather as many resources as possible from any sources at hand. As researchers, your third graders will need to read more than one text on a subject—which of course is not only a crucial part of research; reading across texts also supports a critical awareness of perspective and point of view, an invaluable reading skill highlighted by the Common Core State Standards. Scour the school building for books on the study you want to launch. Visit the public library with your children, and have them bring back as many texts as they can find on the topic. Teach them about interlibrary loans and book-request forms! Get online (you and your colleagues, not the kids, yet), and sort through some of the great social studies websites that are available to you and your students. It seems like there will never be enough money for us to buy all the nonfiction books we want—but the kids need us to teach social studies anyway, and they need us all to get involved in seeking texts and building libraries to support the studies that we think are important. Help each other share resources—this may be a time when you want to stagger when teachers in your grade teach social studies, and have a cart of materials, including books, art images, a list of websites and a couple of laptops or DVD players, and your FOSS kits, that are shared across classes. If you have enough resources, you can make some baskets of texts, and sort them, perhaps starting with countries in Europe but then letting your baskets evolve as your students' interests in particular topics are piqued. One could imagine possible labels for baskets being: Sports in Europe, Food and Dining, History, and the like.

If resources are limited, here are a few tips when assembling subtopic bins or text sets. First, create fewer bins with more materials in the bin. This means the groups of students may be larger, but it will be less content to prepare. Second, use all forms of literacy—visual literacy, like photographs; map literacy, like maps of major European cities; media literacy, like video or audio clips. Third, there are some helpful professional resources when compiling text sets, like Stephanie Harvey's *Toolkit Text*, Harvey "Smokey" Daniels's *Texts and Lessons for Content-Area Reading*, or Lucy Calkins and Kathleen Tolan's *Units of Study for Teaching Reading*.

### Part One: The Research Cycle: Starting with Collecting, Vocabulary, and Essential Questions

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At the start of a research cycle, we generally gather and scan our resources. This means that we look across the available texts and begin to get a sense of what there is to know about this subject. You'll probably want to sort the books you have into some categories—though if your students are experienced social scientists, you could begin with all the texts in one place, and the students will sort them as they browse. For the first day or two, you'll probably want to teach your students that researchers read fairly quickly, trying to get a broad overview of the topic at hand. It's often helpful to start a

word chart for words related to this study—students can add to these teaching tools as they study, putting up information they feel would help the class, using index cards and markers.

For instance, after a first day of reading across some of the texts on European countries, you could help children to notice how the books they read about countries often have similar subtopics. In addition to giving some facts about the country, such as major cities, population size, and population statistics, they often talk about daily life, food, history, sports, government, and culture. In clubs, children will be reading about these different aspects of countries and can discuss what they learn, bringing forward all they know about powerful nonfiction reading. As they read, coach your readers to draw on strategies that served them well when reading nonfiction in the past, such as noting big ideas and comparing and contrasting. This would certainly be a good time to pull out some of the charts you created earlier in the year to support nonfiction reading work.

In these early, collective inquiry stages, teach your students that vocabulary and concepts that appear in more than one text, or in more than one place in a text, are probably important. Remind them that right now, we want to get a lot of reading done, so we're not stopping to write lots of notes in our notebooks—instead, we're using Post-its to mark information that might be important, going on and reading more, and then sharing our findings at the end of class. You may need to reteach a quick lesson on how to sort texts from easier to harder, which readers should do quickly with a partner before choosing a text to read. By this time of year, though, readers don't necessarily have to begin with the easiest available text—instead, they can look across the texts, figure out where they, as readers, are on that continuum of difficulty, and get started there. Teach your readers to use the strategies they already know—to quickly walk through a book, looking at how it is organized, at how much white space there is, at how dense the text is, at how much the vocabulary is explained, and to start with a book they can read comfortably. Partners may share books, reading silently, pausing briefly to synthesize, scribbling very quick Post-its as they go, saving big conversation until they have read lots of pages. However, stress that this time is about reading the words and synthesizing the information in the words with other text features and pictures on the page, not just for perusing interesting photographs.

If you haven't already taught your children how to make on-the-run teaching tools for a classroom study, take a moment to model how to use an index card or Post-it, and markers or pencils to *swiftly* contribute to the classroom word charts, time lines, and so on. These types of visuals will support the Common Core State Standard of interpreting visual representations of information and realizing how the information contributes to the understanding of a topic. A group that is studying art in Italy might have a card that says: "Uffizi—famous museum in Florence." Another partnership might add on to this card with a Post-it, saying: "Old museum—has Renaissance paintings!" A group that is studying people might dash up and put a Post-it on the map that has the words: "Rome—Vatican—where Pope lives."

Meanwhile, during read-aloud, you might choose both narrative and nonfiction texts, and perhaps some primary documents. This work will assist in the Common Core

State Standards’ supported skill of drawing central ideas and information from primary and secondary sources. After each read-aloud experience, add to your learning tools—kids will stop and jot as you read, and then at the end of the read-aloud they could add names, places, events, and so forth to your charts in the room. As you read aloud, model how you make connections between what you are studying and what you have previously studied as a class. You’ll want to emphasize how the new information you are collecting is adding to the knowledge you already had. As the Common Core State Standards remind us, students should be able to summarize new information they are collecting and distinguish new information from prior knowledge or opinions. For example, if you’re learning about the cultures of Italy and England, you may want to encourage students to make connections between what they are learning and what they already knew about these places.

By Day 4 or so, you’ll guide student groups to pay attention to specific aspects of Italy and England. You will show them how to break apart a topic into smaller, more specialized, and more manageable subtopics. For instance, you’ll gather students together and say, “Readers, for the last two days we’ve taken a survey course on Italy and England. We’ve been working hard to get a broad overview of these countries. I noticed that a lot of you were reading, talking, and writing about different ideas that you are learning about both countries. It made me realize that this might be a time where we can break down this big topic and begin to research smaller topics to be able to do a better job comparing and contrasting—for example, the culture of Italy and England, the geography, or even study the differences between the urban and rural communities within each country.”

Encourage students to keep up their reading strategies, like using Post-its to mark information that might be important or keeping track of names that repeat or specific dates that begin a chapter or paragraph. We know that if students are reading about the music of Italy, they are probably going to hear the names Luciano Pavarotti and Andrea Bocelli again and again. This is something to draw students’ attention to as they read, to find important information by looking for names or ideas that repeat.

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

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Once your students have developed a general sense of knowledge by browsing the texts you have available, having lots of partner- and some large-group conversations, and creating classroom learning tools, they’re ready to start zooming in on more specialized subjects. If you’re aligning this reading unit to your social studies workshop and writing unit, then students can begin collecting information toward their writing projects. Even if you’re not doing a writing unit, students will be writing to think and sharing their knowledge with other students. The Common Core State Standards emphasize the importance of short research projects that build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic. This unit provides the perfect opportunity

for students to do just that. You'll want to help students to zoom in on an area of interest and to form inquiry groups around these special topics. Two ways to focus our research are through essential questions we have and topics we find fascinating.

One way to help you guide your students' research is generating meaningful, powerful, and possibly essential questions. You can teach your students to look back over their notes, revising their thinking to form questions that become springboards into inquiry. Some of you have been laying the groundwork for questioning and categorizing information in your past units. Informally assess your students—are they familiar with the practice of looking over their notes, seeing what larger categories emerge and questions they could pursue? You might choose to draw on some of the charts the class did earlier in the year to remind students of this work.

Some teachers like to pose essential questions, or guide their students toward the kinds of essential questions that social scientists often ask, such as:

- What information do I know about this topic?
- What am I curious to learn more about? What questions do I have?
- How might I find some of the answers to my questions?
- What are my hypotheses to my questions?

You might also want to steer children toward unit specific questions like:

- What are some characteristics of this country that make it unique?
- What are some similarities and differences between two countries?
- What are some ways to describe some elements of a culture, such as language, religion, customs, artistic expression, and money?
- Describe the stories, folktales, music, and artistic creations that are part of the country's culture. Compare and contrast these with those of another culture.
- Compare elements of the country or culture you're studying with elements of your own culture or country.

Teach your students that researchers search for answers to questions such as these as a way to guide their study. Teach your third graders to return to their texts, reading in order to develop more knowledge about the essential questions the classroom is researching. Of course, as they read, they may decide to add to the essential questions and expand the scope of the classroom inquiry—or they may decide that one question is too broad, and you'll teach them how to create smaller, more focused questions.

You don't have to begin with questions, though—you can also begin with what you find fascinating. You may find that it's easier for your students to come up with categories of information about subtopics they find fascinating. In that case, their inquiry groups may form around topics such as:

- Music and the Arts
- Languages and Cultures inside a Country
- Government Systems and Money
- Sports and Recreation

Once your students have some areas of focus, help them to organize themselves into research groups around their special topics. As your students embark on their research, you may wish to return to the unit on writing to learn, and to the nonfiction reading unit, to see if there are any particular strategies that you want to reinforce with small groups of readers. Continue giving students time to read, to talk to their partner, and to share some of what they've learned with other students. They'll probably no longer be putting as much up on the walls of the classroom, since they'll be busy filling their notebooks with the Post-its and notes they're jotting as they read. You may find it helpful to teach some quick note-taking strategies, including boxes and bullets, tables and charts, time lines, and labeled drawings. You'll also want to revisit how readers use their strategies for narrative and expository texts, to read across texts that are multi-structured. Show how you look across a page and synthesize the information you gain from the captions, the sidebars, and the main text. Then show how you ponder not just the information but also the feelings that are instilled by the informational images you encounter. Teach your students to begin to read each new text against the ones they have already read. What new information does each text offer? What new perspectives are included?

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

Additionally, capitalize on the fact that students are working collaboratively in this unit! Have students stop and share with their research groups often, processing the information they are collecting and learning about the essential question they are pursuing. Teach your students that researchers can work together to identify all of the possible facts that might help address or explore a question, wondering how all of these facts fit together and hypothesizing possible answers. Many teachers find it very helpful to remind or teach partners or groups to make quick lists of information, describe an important scene, explain something using a boxes-and-bullets structure

to organize the information, discuss a specific cause-and-effect relationship, or explore the dynamics of a topic by comparing and contrasting.

One last note about the questioning process: Teachers have found great success when modeling their own reading and research process, generating their own questions as they read. We put the highest regard on modeling our own reading and writing for our students; Harvey and Daniels remind us of the importance of modeling your own research process, including modeling your own curiosity and pursuing your own questioning. Carry this modeling beyond the content area study—demonstrate this inquiry process in other subject areas or even in everyday occurrences. Begin a connection to a minilesson by saying, “You know, class, I’ve been wondering what all the orange flags mean that have been recently put in, lining the sidewalk outside my house. I’m especially interested in this because the flags go right past my favorite old tree that my grandfather planted years and years ago. I’m worried about it! Can’t you see why? So I did a little research . . .” You might bring out a printout from a recent Google search or perhaps a book that you checked out from the library on urban planning and preservation. Or even an informal transcript of an interview you did with a worker who was putting down flags in other parts of the neighborhood. Examples like these model how natural and curious the research process can be for people. They also model the quick, on-the-run, responsive research the Common Core State Standards highlight.

### **Part Three: Presenting Knowledge to Others—Teaching Others with New Knowledge Gained**

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As your researchers become experts, they’ll be eager to share what they’ve learned and the ideas they have about all the new information they know. Students might, then, begin to turn their research into a writing project, or you can imagine small-group or classwide projects.

One possibility for this study is outlined in the corresponding writing curriculum calendar. If you follow that path, students make nonfiction books that you can add to your library on the subjects they find fascinating. They will return to the structure they already know how to write: information books; and they will lean on mentor pieces that will help them to lift the level of what they did earlier in the year.

You can decide the form that your reading and writing celebrations take. Perhaps you’ll have some sort of symposium where you invite younger children to learn from the third graders. Children might stand in areas around a room with displays of the books they read, visuals they studied, the “stuff” they observed and pondered over, together with their writing pieces. They might learn some basics of public speaking—like talking from your mind and heart, not from your page or note cards. Visiting learners might ask questions of the presenter, showing children that their own inquiry can spark inquiry in others.



## UNIT NINE

# Social Issues Book Clubs

JUNE

(Level 3 Reading Benchmark: P)

This unit has become a great favorite with teachers. It serves a few important purposes. For one, the unit continues to encourage 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 books address themes and ideas. Then, too, social issues book clubs ask readers to think about ways books are similar and different, one from another. They support intertextuality. Both of these goals are important in the new Common Core State Standards. Social issues book clubs are important for a few other reasons. They allow you, the teacher, to use the books you actually have on hand with great flexibility. You aren't tied to one genre—you will create text sets that combine poems and articles and other short texts with novels from all sorts of different genres. Reading volume increases as students get more and more curious, more passionate, and smarter about the issues they are considering. And finally, social issues book clubs encourage children to see that reading can help us deal with the issues of our lives.

You may wonder about the term *social issues*. You may ask, "What they are, exactly?" The term *social issues* refers to issues that affect a lot 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 so is the fear that one's family is falling apart. Homelessness, joblessness, bullying, racism, and bias against older people are also examples of social issues. It is helpful for kids to see that by reading, we can watch characters deal with social issues, and we can learn to deal with those issues (and other issues) from books. This is important to do as characters play more complex roles in stories. 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 and get more from them as well.

This unit is unabashed 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 everything we believe. 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. You’ll need to think, as you prepare, 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.

You will undoubtedly find it helpful as you prepare, to also turn to the unit on book clubs in Lucy Calkins’s *The Art of Teaching Reading*, the chapter “Reading for Justice and Power: A Social Issues Book Club Unit” by Mary Coakley, from *Constructing Curriculum: Alternate Units of Study* from the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading* and Randy and Katherine Bomer’s *For a Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action*.

As you start this final month, bear in mind that this is your last chance to provide readers with support to move up levels of text difficulty as aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Although you no doubt feel like you are ready to wind down your teaching, this is actually the month in which you are sending kids off to a summer of practice. So now is the perfect time to help students who are ready to break into another level of text difficulty. You know how to do this—put them in transitional baggies, and provide text introductions and same-book partners. Support some of the new vocabulary that readers will encounter. But the real job is probably more about motivation. After all, kids will be entering a new grade next year. With a final push, they can enter that grade reading at a whole different level. And think about the texts that will become accessible to them as a result of this final push! To energize this final push you’ll absolutely want to do the book talks/book buzzes that create excitement around the newly accessible books, using the social energy of kids who’ve loved those books.

## Organizing the Books and Other Materials

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In the past we have suggested that students read in clubs, primarily from novels, with a few short pieces from other genres thrown into the mix. This year we are still recommending that students have a steady supply of novels, picture books, and short stories as well as a large chunk of nonfiction texts dealing with a variety of social issues aligning with the Common Core State Standards. These nonfiction texts can be from nonfiction books such as biographies of people, historical accounts, anthologies, and expository texts, as well as articles from magazines, editorials, first-person accounts, speeches, and other short texts. Additionally, you’ll want to decide how important it is to you that your readers are reading from multiple copies of texts so that every person in a club is reading the same text. It’s conceivable, though not ideal, that students will read different texts but with a shared lens.

For students at or above grade level, you will likely want to create baskets of texts that are set up to have a few possible issues or themes in common for the students to uncover. While we have recommended in the past that the books be organized by issue and placed in a basket with a label, such as “bullying,” part of the thrill for our young readers is for them to discover and name the issue, or, even more excitingly, multiple issues that begin to surface in their reading. It is also true that labeling books as having one issue can sometimes lead to students going on a sort of scavenger hunt (“Oh, here’s bullying!”) for issues rather than looking at a book as a whole, and seeing that more than one issue may exist in most books and have many possible interpretations. So, while it is highly likely that you might put together a basket of materials based on some common issues that you already have in mind (*Fly Away Home*, *The Hundred Dresses*, an article on child poverty, a book about being unique), and you will know which issues are more than likely to emerge, you will leave the discovering to the students. For your more emergent readers, you may want to rally them around an issue for which you have just-right books and give these children a basket of mixed-genre, leveled texts that make an issue visible, or else create a basket of texts that will naturally point them to a single issue that you know they are passionate about, perhaps even one that has been the talk of the class for a while. For example, you might have a basket of J–K books that demonstrate the pressures people feel to fit in.

We suggest you deliberately make all of your collections very small—no more than three books and a handful of short texts—so there’s room for children to add to the collections. If you don’t classify the books your children know best, this becomes something they can do, and they’ll see how books and other texts can show many issues. You will probably want to have one basket (and one issue) for the whole class to study together through the read-aloud and minilessons. You may choose to convene the class around the same issue that a group of struggling readers will also explore, providing support and lots of dignity for those strugglers.

For suggestions of possible leveled books to include in your study, please see our website. For possible nonfiction texts, we suggest that in addition to looking for updates on our website, you begin to collect articles that deal with issues you know will likely be discussed in your classroom (in part because you know what fiction books you have available). These articles can be found in children’s magazines such as *Time for Kids*, *Scholastic News*, *WR News*, *Highlights*, and *New Moon* as well as online.

## **Part One: Reading Can Teach Us about Issues that Exist in the World and in Our Lives**

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You may begin the unit by showing children 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 that exist in them. This can lead toward the creation of a chart full of social issues. Many times children will look up at this chart and say, “Wait a minute, ‘having absent parents’ is an issue in this book too! Let me show you.” They’ll soon see that the issues they see

in books also thread through their own writing. Some teachers have found that asking students to bring their writing notebooks with them to reading workshop can help facilitate making those connections. You might encourage students to reread their own entries for issues they've dealt with or find important in their own lives. These issues might be more subtly exposed in personal narrative or fiction writing, or they might have been explored in more expository work such as persuasive writing. Students will not only learn to see that they have their own issues in their lives, but they might also find themselves empathizing with characters and saying, "Me too!" This might be a good time for students to pull out their reading notebooks and begin doing some writing about those connections aligning with the Common Core State Standards.

At the start, you may choose to focus this work on characters in stories, including the struggles the characters face, how those struggles may be named as social issues, and how they deal with these struggles. This work helps children move away from sequential retelling, and helps them develop one lens for determining importance in a story. Thus, you could teach your young readers 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  $x$ ?" (with  $x$  being homelessness, or bullying, or losing someone, etc.). Children might ask questions such 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 children to get ready to talk to their book clubs by putting Post-its on moments when they see their characters first facing  $x$ , then struggling with  $x$ , then overcoming or not overcoming  $x$ .

Students who are reading *Amber Brown*, for instance, might read it on the surface level simply as a school story. If they read or reread it, with the lens of "dealing with parents separating," then they notice a lot of moments that they may have missed the first time—the way Amber looks through the photograph album of her dad, the way she thinks about him being in Paris, the way she is unsure about her mother dating. None of these events were significant to the main action of the story and so young 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 *Amber Brown*, the big school problem may get solved. The longer-term, subtler problems she faces may not—which is common in more complicated, higher-level books. Reading with 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 the reader notice any single event so much but that the reader realizes that paying close attention to the details in a story, and talking about those details with others, can lead you to a richer understanding aligning with the Common Core State Standards. They'll feel like smarter readers—and they will be!

Your job in this work would be not only to teach students to locate issues in their books, but also to learn to use this lens as a way to extend their reading and conversation. One way to do this, once you have determined the issues and groups that

this text will be addressing, would be to find scenes where 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 “crucial scenes” can then be closely read by a book club to try and mine the scene for what the character is going through, how he or she is reacting, and what we might learn about the issue or group that scene seems to be about. This work of determining which scenes are important and then thinking about what those scenes are *really* telling us about this book is yet another helpful strategy for interpretation.

If your students have done thematic interpretative work this year, or in past years, they might recall using a strategy of carrying an index card with them through and across books. The card should have a text-specific idea on one side, with a universal theme added later to the reverse side as a means of scaffolding from text-based to wider theme development. You might choose to build off this work by showing kids how they can jot on an index card what the character’s big struggles are and what ideas you’re getting about those struggles. They might then jot on the reverse side more universal notions of issues those struggles make them think of. So, for example, on one side of one student’s card she might have written, “Amber’s parents’ divorce is really bothering her and turning her into a different person.” Once the student has talked and thought a lot about Amber’s life, and the issue of divorce and the struggles surrounding it, that same student might return to her card and on the reverse side write, “Divorce can turn kids’ lives upside down.”

Another way to scaffold children to think critically about these abstract social 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 at the core of the book. For example, you may get children 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 readers could read a book that illustrates this issue, moving 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 carrying those lenses. Then after reading the book and discussion, have the students return to their previous thoughts and see how the book affected (or didn’t) their thinking about that issue. You might also push your children to dig deeper into these issues by asking, “Does the way this story talks about gender (for example) ring true for me?” As they answer this question, they will want to examine why the text reflects or does not reflect their experiences of these issues. They can question what the values are that this text espouses. This can allow children to move between reading and thinking about the sort of world they want to live in.

One thing that we might avoid is the idea that any given book is “about” any one thing. In addition, to say that we can *only* read texts for issues that create dangerous or dramatic situations like abuse or sexism or homelessness also puts limits on 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 around these identities without necessarily always trying to find the “problem” or “issue.”

Nonfiction texts will be a great help in reaching these goals. We will want to make sure that the nonfiction texts we provide come from a variety of angles and cover the many sides of an issue—as well as explore many different groups. By simply having access to these texts students will be more likely to spot the myriad issues living in any one text. You can then explicitly teach students how, when readers have a healthy diet of fiction and nonfiction, we can't help but let one kind of reading inform another. For example, after reading a recent article about the possible connections between food dyes and ADHD, a reader might then read *Joey Pigza Swallowed a Key* with attention to what factors might be out of his control, and which might be entirely in his control. Or if the novel came first, one's interpretation of the article will absolutely be affected by the impressions left from Joey and the struggles that he faced.

## Part Two: Reading with a Lens and Talking Back to the Text

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As children become adept at noticing social issues, they'll often become particularly interested in certain issues. Teach them, as a next step, to come to books with certain lenses—what we might call concerns about social issues. You may find that children 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 that are 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 third-grade 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 we read stories with these lenses, it will be important to talk back to the text in our clubs. We will want to teach our students that talking about these issues can sometimes be a tricky business, and it often helps to keep an open mind and ask each other questions. These questions can serve not only as an entrance point to possibly difficult conversations, but they also help us to train our minds to be more active in our reading and our lives. We might teach our students to ask each other: Are we okay with how this group is being represented? 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," that is, 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?

In their book *For a Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action*, Randy and Katherine Bomer suggest you ask readers to make webs, lists, Venn diagrams, or invent their own ways of depicting all the various groups to which they belong. This is another

great way for us to teach students ways to empathize—to help them realize that not only are the characters in their books members of different groups that might contend with particular kinds of issues, but they are members of groups as well. You might, for instance, belong to the following kinds of groups: male, female; Indian, Korean, African American, Irish American, Haitian; teacher; piano player; tennis player; over-fifty; single father; bird owner, and so forth. Some of the groups are fixed, such as your race and ethnicity. Others, though, are more diverse and fluid: artists, “extreme sports” fans, coffee drinkers, Stephanie Meyers fans. What makes “groups” a critical concept is 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 children 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. Students can carry all of this knowledge of the groups they belong to, the groups that members of their club belong to, and the groups that simply exist in the world, and find similar groups in the texts that they are reading.

This part of the unit is another perfect place to bring in more work with nonfiction texts. We can encourage students to look to nonfiction as a means of learning about groups and issues that they are unfamiliar with—and as a way to back the opinions they are beginning to develop in their clubs. We can model this ourselves with our read-aloud work. When we have finished reading a fiction book, say *One Green Apple*, we can then follow it up saying, “You know, I don’t know as much as I’d like to about what it must be like to be an immigrant and not speak the language, one of the issues we talked about. So I thought I would read this article to help me get a stronger understanding.” If your students have access, you might encourage students to bring in nonfiction texts that complement the work they are doing within their clubs.

Another possible way to bring nonfiction into the work students are doing is for them to consider reading nonfiction with a lens. What issues are they seeing depicted? Do they agree with the way these issues are being portrayed in the text? How does belonging to one group or another color the way one reads a nonfiction text? For example, as a teacher, you likely read every newspaper article on education differently than your friend who is a chef. You might consider showing this to students if you want to highlight the role of critical reading in all genres.

### **Part Three: Bringing Our Lenses to Our World**

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Once readers have some understandings about critical concepts, you can ask them to turn to any texts, not just the ones readily available in the classroom baskets, with those same lenses. This is more difficult, and perhaps not yet possible for many children, since their understanding of how the world operates is naturally naïve and yet to be developed. You can help by practicing looking at anything you read and wondering about how hidden and subtle sources of power, race, class, and gender operate in our culture.

Readers 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 their texts. This provides more teaching opportunities; you can help students see their own lives almost as other texts, laid out on the table alongside the texts of other authors. Ultimately, you want readers to be able to troubleshoot these issues, understanding their complexities and why the issues are not so simple to solve. Reading across texts and genres, and looking at their own lives as backdrops to their reading work, will help young readers see that the issues their characters face have multiple perspectives and multiple causes, some of which are not what they seem. This is a perfect opportunity for students to return to their reading notebooks and begin to use their writing to help think through their new ideas and concerns about the issues they've been studying across their books. You might teach students to revisit thought prompts they learned earlier in the year to stretch their thinking, such as, "This makes me think . . .," "On the other hand . . .," "This connects with . . .," "I used to think . . . but now I think . . .," or "Some people think . . . but I think . . ." Students can then take their writing back to their clubs and use it to base new conversations off of, as well as to angle, the way they read their next texts.

Another important piece of this part of the unit is for students to continue to do everything they know about reading *in service* or developing a stronger understanding of the issues they are reading about. We have seen that often, when students become involved in an issue, they forget to do much of the good thinking work they have been studying all year. If you haven't already done so, this is a perfect time to bring back charts with various reading strategies from earlier in the year, such as ways to think more deeply about character, tips for synthesizing within and across nonfiction, strategies for understanding what a text is *really* about, and of course, reminders for how to keep one's reading volume up even when we are stopping more often to talk and write about our reading. If you did not previously have these charts hanging in your classrooms, these might be charts you develop or present during teaching shares and read-aloud time.

You can well imagine how this looking at the world and seeing their issues playing out everywhere will likely move students to want to learn more—to possibly do something about their issue. In addition to inspirational articles and biographies, you might lead students to texts, such as *Change the World for Ten Bucks* or *101 Ways You Can Save the Planet before You're 12*, to help them see that they have power to effect change in their lives and the lives of others. If it makes sense for your students and you have a day or two at the end of the unit, you might consider having clubs create mini-social action projects as spinoffs to the work they have done together throughout the units. These can be quick e-mails or letters, presentations to the class, poster campaigns, or scripted and videotaped public service announcements.

In fact, since this unit is meant to be the capstone to a year's worth of reading work and learning, you might choose to direct any desires for activism to reach into the summer months. One way you could do this is to encourage students to think about the issues that became nearest and dearest to their hearts over the course of this unit and

to then narrow down to one that they want to commit to learning more about, understanding more deeply, and perhaps even taking action around. Students can collect book lists for books to check out of the library, websites they can return to, and so on, which will serve as their go-to materials when they are away from school. If you are looping with your class, or simply feel comfortable lending books to your students, you might consider stuffing summer book baggies with texts connected to the social issue interests of each child. You might even consider having students create a social action proposal, where they record their plans for their summer reading, as well as any action plans they might have.

## Additional Resources

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

The following teaching points represent one possible pathway for this unit. Please consider the bends in the road as places to stop, reflect, and assess how you will want to move forward into the next part in ways that will best move your readers and help them to become the most interpretive and critical readers they can be. Some of the teaching points listed next are adapted from "Reading for Justice and Power: A Social Issues Book Club Unit" by Mary Coakley, from *Constructing Curriculum*.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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### Part One: Reading Can Teach Us about Issues that Exist in the World and in Our Lives

- “Today I want to teach you that critical readers choose the lenses through which we wish to view texts—and life. When we decide to read critically, we put on lenses that allow us to see social issues as they thread through books (and also through movies and the world). Reading for social issues can help us understand people in books, movies, and our world.”
  - *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Sometimes as readers we only have our own voices in our heads—and we only have one or two lenses to look through. Sometimes it helps us to look through other people’s lenses. Today, I’d like to suggest that every once in a while, as you are reading or talking to your club, that you refer to our class chart of possible social issues, or think of the issues that you already know matter to the members of your clubs, so you can have some other lenses to look through and consider.”
  - *Teaching Share:* “Social issues aren’t just something we can find in our books, they are often things we can find in our own writing. One way we can fill our minds up with social issues that will be important to us as individuals is to look back in our writing notebooks and see what issues we’ve written about. Whether we look to see what the hearts of our stories tend to be, or else opinions or claims we tend to return to again and again, these are often social issues. Once we have identified one or two important ones we can not only read in our clubs for those issues, we can also compare how the authors treat those issues with the way we have treated them in our own writing.”
- “Today I want to teach you that when we are onto something as readers, we bring in whatever we are thinking to conversations with other readers. If we’re in book clubs, for example, and we’ve been reading a shared book critically, we’re apt to talk about issues of fairness that we see in that book. We say things like ‘I think that is fair because . . .’ or ‘I think this unfair because . . .,’ and ‘This fairness/unfairness matters because . . .’”
- “Today I want to teach you that it’s not enough for readers to simply identify issues as we read. Instead, we also want to ask ourselves, ‘What does this book teach us about this issue?’ and then to follow that up by asking, ‘Do we agree or disagree with what this book is teaching us about this issue?’”
  - *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Readers, can I stop you? The readers in this club did something that was so wise I thought we should all consider trying it. They uncovered a few issues in the book they are reading, but they wanted to

learn more about those issues. So they each grabbed a nonfiction article about one of those issues and taught each other facts about the issue they've been pondering. They then returned to their book and saw how this new nonfiction knowledge affected the ways they understand the issues in their books."

- "Today I want to teach you that another way we can learn about issues in our world and in our lives is to study the characters in our books closely. We can study a character's desires, wondering why he or she might long for those things. Readers sometimes record characters' wants on Post-it notes or in reading notebooks and then study those notes closely to see if we can see a pattern of longing that gives us more insights into issues the characters might be facing."
  - ▶ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* "We can also pay attention to our characters' problems to see if those problems, connected or not connected to their desires, give us any insights into issues that might live in our books."
  - ▶ *Teaching Share:* "Readers, I'd like to suggest something to you. For the rest of this unit, when you find yourself getting a big idea about the book you are reading, about the characters or issues, can you write down that idea on an index card? This is something we did earlier in the year as well. You can use that index card as a bookmark in that book as a way to remind yourself of some of the big thinking you want to do as you read. I'm going to write on my index card from our read-aloud, 'Amber's acting up because her parents' divorce is really bothering her.' Then, as we read forward, I'm going to keep this idea in mind, revise it if I need to, or collect evidence that shows I'm on the right track."
  
- "Another way readers can use our knowledge of characters to help us understand the issues that exist in the world and in our lives is to look at characters' reactions to the issues they face. We can then ask ourselves if we agree or disagree with our characters' reactions."
  - ▶ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* "Sometimes it's challenging to try to understand a character's reactions, especially when we don't agree with them. One thing that we learned to do earlier in our character work was to try to walk in our characters' shoes. We can think and talk about what we would have felt if we were experiencing what the characters are experiencing, and consider how we would feel and what choices we might make."
  
- "Today I want to teach you that in addition to studying characters, another way we can think more deeply about social issues in our books is to pay attention to crucial scenes in our books. We can mark those pages and consider how the issue is shown in these parts. We can notice how our characters react to the situations in these scenes and figure out what that teaches us about the issues that are present in the book."



and think about how the groups I belong to are represented (or not represented), and whether I agree or disagree with the books' representations."

- *Mid-workshop teaching point:* "Readers, some of you have already begun doing this, so I think it's a good idea for everyone to hear about it. In addition to thinking about the groups you belong to, you might also read with the lenses of the groups some of your club members belong to that you don't typically consider. It's another way to get a fresh perspective on the issues in the books you are reading."
- "Today I want to teach you that another way to read with a lens is to look at who has the power in a book. Which groups? Which groups do not have the power? And what does this tell us about what the author might be trying to teach us about the issues that live in this book?"
- "Today I want to teach you that readers can and should challenge the texts that we are reading. We can ask ourselves, 'Am I okay with how this group is being represented?' 'Does this fit with what I have seen in the world?' 'Is there something the author seems to want me to know about being a member of that group?' 'Does this fit with my life?' 'What kind of community is this?' 'What causes people to act this way?' 'What would happen if the character's group was "flipped," that is, if a girl character was a boy or a poor character rich? Would that change the person's choices or reactions?' 'What does this say about what I believe?' These questions are great lenses with which to read and talk about our books and the issues that are coming up."
- "We've been reading our fiction books critically for several days now. And alongside those books, we've been picking up nonfiction texts to add to our thinking and knowledge. Today I want to teach you another way that we can read nonfiction with issues in mind. We did this work earlier in the unit when we were first reading our novels. We realized that we could carry the whole of who we were, the groups we belonged to, the experiences we had, and look at how books depicted issues that are near and dear to our hearts. We can do that same work with nonfiction. We can carry who we are as people and what we are aware of when it comes to certain issues and look to see what we can learn about a particular topic. For example, as a teacher, I read articles about education in the newspaper differently than my friend who is a chef. When we sit with our clubs and read the same nonfiction texts we should be having different reading experiences because of the lives that we've lived. And those different experiences won't affect only our interpretations of the text, but also our conversations about the text."
- "Today I want to teach you that we might want to consider reading multiple sources of nonfiction on the same topic to get an even deeper understanding of the topic. We can share different sources with our club and all read different texts

and then come together and share what we've learned, as well as discuss whether, based on our growing knowledge of an issue, we agree or disagree with each of the nonfiction texts we are reading. I can already hear some of you asking, 'Disagree with a nonfiction text? I thought nonfiction meant everything was factual. You can't disagree with facts.' But today I want to teach you that just as we have learned we can push back against fiction authors' portrayals of different issues of fiction, we can also push back against nonfiction authors' inclusion of certain facts, or even the way they choose to write about those facts. For example, I might read an article that says, 'Beavers use their teeth to cut down trees to build dams.' Or I could read, 'Beavers ingeniously use their teeth to create vital dams that help them and other animals survive.' Or, yet another article might read, 'Beavers destroy trees to build dams that change the natural landscape.' Even though all the articles contain the same basic facts, the way the author is presenting those facts is still worth pushing back against."

### **Part Three: Bringing Our Lenses to Our World**

- "Today I want to teach you that when powerful readers finish a book, we keep asking questions and thinking about our characters. We might find ourselves asking other readers, 'Could we have done anything to change life for this character in this book? Would we have been able to do anything realistically? What constraints might we need to have changed to make a difference?'"
- "Readers, today I'm going to teach you that everything you read (or watch on TV or listen to in music) has issues tucked inside. There are no special texts that do this—it's the work we as readers do that makes the issues pop out. We carry who we are and what we know to everything we experience, and we read it critically, with agreement, learn from it—or do all of the above! Today I'd like you to try something—I'd like you to return to your independent reading and choose one of your non-club books and read it today with the lens of some of the issues you've been studying and talking about in your club. It might help you to have your reading notebook out, your index cards from past books visible, and sticky notes ready for any big thoughts you might be having."
- "Today I want to teach you that book clubs become so invested in the social issues in which we have lived that we are likely to find ourselves proposing solutions to those issues we discuss in our groups. We might continue to collect as much information on an issue as possible, looking at nonfiction texts, even jumping online to do some quick research. We might even decide to take action. For example, sometimes we raise money for a certain cause or do a 'teach-in' for our

peers, families, and/or teachers about a particular issue. We might write letters to the editor of a newspaper or propose guidelines for dealing with a certain social issue in our schools.”

- “Today I want to teach you that when we take a critical lens to our books, we find ourselves bringing the same lens to our daily lives. When this happens, we write about our new or changing observations of the world, sometimes writing descriptively and sometimes writing reflectively about our ideas for social change. We then let the writing we’ve done influence our reading—making us see the reading through our own thoughts and reflections.”
- “Today I want to teach you that, even though our school year is winding down, it does not mean that the passions we have developed for the issues in our world need to be left behind. Instead, we can look to the summer months as an opportunity for us to have more time to read about the issues we care most about. One way we can do that is to begin to gather books and other materials that will help us learn and think more deeply about what interests us. We can then read those texts with a running list of other possible reading materials we might want to collect to make sure we’ll have everything we need throughout the summer.”
- “Today I want to teach you that readers can use our knowledge to effect change. Throughout history, people who were well read allowed their reading lives to inspire them to take action for a cause. They then turned to reading again to gather the tools they needed to take the actions they thought would make the biggest change. We can do that today. We can use our reading to find information and examples that will help us make our action plans come to fruition.”

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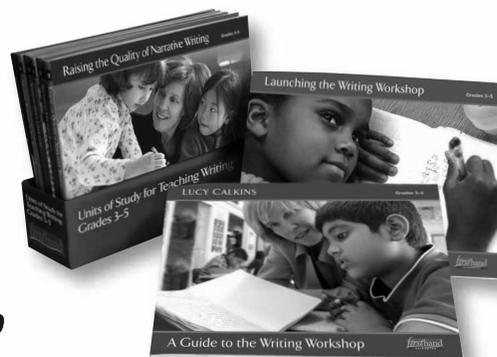
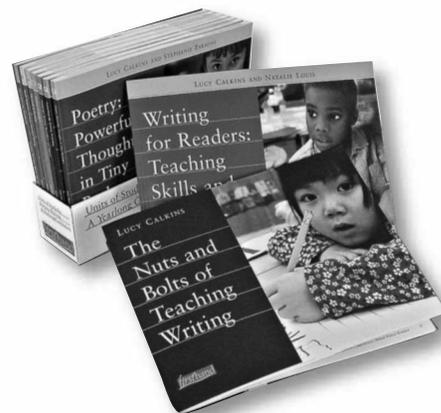
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