

Units of Study for Teaching Reading  
A Workshop Curriculum, Middle School Grades

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**Question:** *How can teachers make time for both reading and writing?*

**Mary Ehrenworth:**

Alright friends, let's talk for a minute about planning your year-long curriculum. Because one of the things that gets really hard is there's the curriculum you'd love to have that's in your heart, in your mind, and then there's the curriculum that is facing a lot of other constraints. Constraints of time, constraints of resources, constraints of colleagues, all of those can restrain your curriculum. So let's imagine, for instance, if I'm thinking... I'm just going to model for a second on sixth grade. So let's imagine I have this really happy, kind of perfect world where I have maybe 90 minutes for literacy. Like I remember several years ago when the mayor in New York City gave us 90 minutes for reading and writing separate from social studies. It was so beautiful. So that means, if that's my, if that's true, if I've got that, I could do simultaneous reading and writing units. Now let's just imagine what that might look like.

This could be a really beautiful year where I could be teaching personal narrative and meanwhile, the kids are in a deep study of character. Which is, by the way, also lovely because now it's like the characters in my book and the characters, you know, in my own life. Then I can go into information writing while the kids are going into tapping the power of nonfiction. A deep study of nonfiction. Both books and then texts sets. That's going to work out beautifully. Then, we can be in social issue book clubs while writing literary essays. And that's going to be great because we can write our literary essays about the books that we're reading in our social issue book clubs. Then we can be doing fantasy writing and fantasy reading. So we can be reading as writers and writing as readers, which will raise the level of both. And then maybe we finish the year with poetry. And that can be a reading and writing immersion.

So if I have that time, I'm really happy. Thank you, thank you to my principal. I can guarantee that the kids are going to grow tremendously as readers and writers. I have the time to breathe and to teach deeply into these. Now let's imagine that you don't have 90 minutes for reading and writing. And instead you'll have, you're one of our teachers, like many of our teachers, and I was the same way when I started out. That you have 45 minutes or you have 50 minutes. Frankly, even 70 minutes, you can't really do two simultaneous units with 70 minutes. Instead what you can do, is you can add in more read aloud, or you can add in more time for independent reading. So let's imagine then. The first thing I have to say, and it is so hard to say this, but I have to say to myself, I can't do that. I wish I could do that. Maybe sometime I'll be able to wrestle control of the schedule and I'll be able to do it, but I

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can't do that. Otherwise what happens is, you have a hypothetical curriculum and then across the year you get more and more frustrated. Then you keep thinking like, why am I behind? You're not behind, this was never going to be realistic if I have 45 or 50 minutes. So the first we have to do is I have to make some harder choices about, I really have to alternate my reading and writing units.

So I'll just show you how I might think about it. So the first thing I think about is, I probably want to start out with a writing unit because I know that in two to three weeks of personal narrative, I can build relationships with kids, I can get to know them in a way that would take me months of doing any other kind of work. One reason we do narrative is to build relationships with kids. So let's say that that means I'm going to start with personal narrative. Then, I have to say to myself, okay, then I want to get kids into a deep study of reading. So they're going to be able to go into reading. But now if I'm picking what I might be able to do next, I probably actually want to go into nonfiction reading, so that they can be doing research. Which will then inform them being able to do nonfiction writing. So I'll be going writing then reading, then reading then writing. Same thing, now I've got a little bit of a pattern. Then we can do social issue book clubs, and then the kids could do literary essays.

But now I have a really, really hard choice because one, two, three, four, five, six. I mean seven units could really be the most you could do. Most of us have nine months of school. So if each unit, I plan it to be four unit weeks, it turns into five, I can't do more than seven. So now it's breaking my heart, but I can either do fantasy reading or writing, or I can do poetry. So, it's just like, they're both great choices, there's no right or wrong. You just have to decide and just say to yourself, okay we'll do this, we just won't do this. So that's the first thing. So see how I had to make some choices, but what I didn't try to do is say, I'm just going to try to keep it simultaneous. But now there is one more thing that could be a little helpful, which is that sometimes what happens is... First of all, if this is what you're doing, you want to set your publishing date. So it's like, it's a narrative I can get done by September 29th, or whatever is like four weeks in. And I want this unit to be three weeks, maybe turning into four, but I don't want to plan it for five and it turns into seven. 'Cause it'll be too long that the kids aren't reading. And then my deep study of character, that unit needs to be like four weeks long, not seven weeks. Four weeks long, not seven. Because otherwise it's too long that they're out of reading or writing.

Now that said, there are ways that you could sometimes, like let's go down here and look at this for a second. So like social issue book clubs, the very first part of social issue book clubs has kids reading. They all read at least one novel and they're studying character relationships. So they're deeply in the study of character relationships. It could be, meanwhile then, the first bend of literary essays. This is, these are all broken down into bends. And we did think strategically to try to help you with this. Is maybe I want to do bend one of social issues, all the kids read a

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novel, they're thinking deeply and mostly about character relationships and issues within those. And then we're going to do bend one of writing, which is character essays. Then I could do bend two of the reading, which has the kids looking at themes and issues that are hiding in texts. And conveniently, then to the Kate Roberts road of this gorgeous lit essay unit is thematic essays. So great, so they've read a novel, at least one novel. So this is like seven to 10 days at the most. Then we're at our essay, we write our first essay. It's really about seven days. Then we're back to reading another novel, and in fact not just a novel, but building up some texts around it. Then we're going to write thematic essays. Now in these text sets that we're building up, bend three is they build up these text sets. And then they can do compare and contrast essays. So see how that way I've taken what would have been three to four weeks, three to four weeks, and I'm doing instead a week, and then a week, a week, and a week. It might be slightly longer than a week, but then they're not so long out of reading or writing.

And frankly, there's another thing that I could do. Which is if I know I'm constrained by time, it might be that I get to bend one, bend one, bend two, bend two, and then this, I'm going to do, if I have to do this for state tests. Which we do it for state tests in most of our states. But if you're doing smarter balance, or I'll just do this in test prep. So I could also do that. I could just move it out and do this in my test prep. So I could either try to get to both of them. And the same thing with, let's just try for a second. If we want to think here about the nonfiction. Okay, so the first thing they do in nonfiction is they do nonfiction book clubs. And that's like seven to 10 days where they read these gorgeous, big, fat books. Meanwhile, they learn to write these long information essays. Which could, by the way, be about what they're learning about in these big, fat books where they're synthesizing information across many, many pages. And now they're synthesizing information in ways to teach readers. That could work out. Then the kids move into text sets. And then they work on nonfiction books. And they're actually writing books now. Then, frankly, the last two bends, I would probably say let's move these into social studies or science. Because you just can't do it all. Teach them enough about nonfiction and then they could do this in social studies. They can do research projects and they could do blogs or they could do nonfiction books in social studies.

So part of it is thinking about, especially nonfiction, can live a little bit in your content classes, especially if you got great content colleagues that you're all, some of you are humanities teachers. So it's like, collaborate with yourself. Divide up your year a little bit. But meanwhile, that's a way that you might have to make some choices about the pacing of your units. One tip, can you change the order of the units? Yeah, of course, like the curriculum is in your hands. Like we're just here to give you support. We're here to help you. But do know that there's been a little bit of thinking behind it. So that, for instance, if you took the first writing unit or the first reading and you decided to do those later in the year 'cause you have colleagues pressuring you, for instance, to start with nonfiction. Do know that there's a lot of lessons in the first two units for reading and for writing. The first launch units, on

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partner work, on building up homework and stamina, on beginning to set major goals and self-assessing. So you'd want to take some of those, teach that teaching, and weave it into whatever unit you do start first with. Okay. Okay, I hope that gives you a little idea about the way that you might think about the sort of compromises. To do curriculum work is to be in a constant state of compromise.