

Up the Ladder Units: Accessing Grades 3–6 Writing Units of Study
By Lucy Calkins and Colleagues from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project

FAQ Video Transcripts

View this video and more Frequently Asked Questions at:
unitsofstudy.com/uptheladder

Question: *How do the Up the Ladder units accelerate kids' growth in each genre?*

Hareem Atif Khan:

In writing workshop, something that we want kids to be able to do is to write with volume, to be able to organize their writing, to be able to study mentor texts. And to be able to go back to their writing and make it better, to revise it. So not just to generate a ton when they're drafting, but to go back and make sizeable revisions, not just insert a carrot here or drop in an apostrophe there—those are not what we count as revisions at all. What we mean is, oh, look at my introduction, let me think how can I craft this is a different way? Can I take what this mentor author is doing and this mentor author is doing, study their techniques and combine them and make my introduction so much more powerful?

So that kind of real workshop approach is taught, but in a way that does not really have that much of a cognitive load on, oh, this has got to be perfect because you're writing one piece across all of this time, so it's got to be a really super-developed piece and there's going to be this grand publication party. I think one of the biggest things that the upper letter units do is take a lot of the pressure away because kids are creating a lot of products, a lot of pieces—they're writing across the month, creating a lot of pieces. And so it's like, oh, I'm writing piece one, I'm writing piece two, I'm writing piece three. And it stops both teachers and kids from getting too wedded, or too attached to this one piece so they feel like, oh, this is perfection. I can't revise it. We're like, okay, great. Move on. Write another one. Revise another one. So just the sheer volume that is produced, the sheer volume of writing that is produced.

The other thing that really helps kids accelerate is this notion of you've got to organize your writing and you can do that and be really messy about it but you're organizing in a lower expectation environment than the grade level environment. So it's a huge cognitive milestone, a huge developmental milestone when our toddler can separate the yellow blocks from the red blocks. And we celebrate that, and we notice that because it's so concrete. But to be able to take all the content that I know, that I'm writing, and to organize that into different categories and to say, I'm going to take this chunk and put it in the beginning. I'm going to take this chunk and these two pieces overlap and I'm going to separate them—that's abstract work. And it's an equally big moment to celebrate when kids can organize abstract ideas in their head in that way. PhD dissertation students struggle to do that, right?

Up the Ladder Units: Accessing Grades 3–6 Writing Units of Study
By Lucy Calkins and Colleagues from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project

Another thing that you're going to find on these Up the Ladder units is that they're very specific editing moves that have been very deliberately inserted. Things that, you know, that teachers assume that they should have learned this and catered to, but the fact of the matter is, you're going to have kids who are writing run-on sentences in the third grade. You're going to have kids who are writing run-on sentences in the eighth grade. You're going to have college students who are writing run-on sentences. And so that's the kind of the thing that you have to teach again and again, because humans think and talk in run-on sentences. So that's up there as one of the editing lessons and it's kind of stressed throughout the book. Something like paragraphing is not just an editing move, it's actually a structural organization move, thinking where does one paragraph end, where does another paragraph begin? Do I want to add more stuff now that I'm paragraphing in this way? Does this paragraph look too skimpy? Those are decisions that adult writers make. Those are decisions that we want kids to become very at home with, and in a very structured way, they're taught across the units so that even our youngest writers don't feel overwhelmed when they have to do this with much more difficult content. It's much easier to organize my chapter book on line craft. It's much easier to organize my Poppleton-esque story than it is for me to create a much more difficult thing later on.