

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

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Question: *How did the UTL units come to be and who should use them?*

Lucy Calkins:

I couldn't be prouder than I am of the *Up The Ladder* series. It's a special favorite of mine and I am almost like a missionary in recruiting people to look at it carefully because I think that this series answers a very real need in this field. The need is caused because often times teachers in particularly grades four, five, six and it's also true for seven and eight, but teachers in grades four, five and six go to teach the units of study in writing, and they go to teach these units and they realize the kids don't necessarily have the prerequisite skills, so that they're ready for the units of study. Maybe they're going to teach it in fifth grade, the unit on research based argument essay, and perhaps the kids don't have a background in writing essays. You can't really teach kids research based argument essay, if they don't know how to write an essay. Teachers are very often struggling when they're particularly teaching the upper grade writing units and this struggle happens when the kids don't have the prerequisite skills and they don't have the prerequisite skills usually because the district has just adopted the units of study, so these aren't kids who've had the opportunity to grow over all these years; kindergarten, first, second, third, fourth grade to be ready for the units of study.

The *Up The Ladder* series was written to accelerate kids' development to put them on a fast track, so they can very quickly develop the skills that they need and be able to thrive in the units of study curriculum, which of course, is an incredibly ambitious curriculum. The *Up The Ladder* series is being used in a very wide variety of schools: some very high achieving schools that are new to writing workshop or where the grade before just didn't really focus on teaching writing, so the kids have a bit of a gap that they need to fill are using it and it's also being used in high need schools where the kids haven't had enough time to read and to write. I frankly call it the, "Oh, shit," curriculum. I don't know if I should on video saying this, but I tell people that when you look at a unit of study and you say, "Oh, shit. This is a lot. Whoa. I don't know if my kids are ready for this," and sometimes you're even saying, "I don't know if I'm ready for this." The nice thing about the *Up The Ladder* curriculum is that it moves kids along incredibly quickly and it's also really supportive for teachers.

It's supportive in all kinds of ways for teachers. The most obvious way is that we've video taped every mini lesson and we haven't video taped it in a perfect way. We actually were doing it a little it a little bit like this, where we just gave the mini

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lesson to the camera and I asked all my colleagues to only prepare for the mini lesson for 10 minutes, not longer, so we weren't doing perfect mini lessons. We were kind of, sort of reading the book even while we were giving them. I think it's helpful for you, the teacher to be able to watch a not perfect video of us doing a quick version of this mini lesson, just so you can get a feeling for how does it go in eight minutes or nine minutes? We've videotaped it, but it's also the *Up The Ladder* units are supportive of teachers because instead of doing 15 different ways to have share sessions, we have five or six ways to do share sessions, so that your kids can get accustomed to these as ways of sharing.

We've also designed small group work in ways that we think will be particularly helpful to you, making the support for small groups lean and efficient. In lots of ways, the *Up The Ladder* series is designed to accelerate kids' progress and it's also designed to accelerate teachers' progress, so that you get a lot of help in teaching something that's complicated and that's so critical for kids.