

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: *What will kids learn and do across the narrative unit and how will that prepare them for grade-level narrative writing?*

Mike Ochs:

The narrative Up the Ladder unit is a very exciting unit. As you know, we often start off with narrative units in all of units of study and grade levels. And the reason for that is, well, first of all, we're story-telling creatures. Story is very much a part of the human condition. We like stories. Small children play act stories, right? People love to watch movies and read books. When we dream, our brains tell us stories, right? Stories are a part of who we are. And so they're the most immediate way to access any kind of writing, which is to start with a story. And we always start any of our units with writing about the self, right? The old saying is, "Write what you know," right? And so what you know best are stories from your own life.

And so, in the *Up the Ladder: Accessing grade 3-6 Narrative Unit of Study*, what we do is we take writers through three bends. And in the first bend, we introduce a way to come up with story ideas and a way to start the writing process, which is, as I said before, the touch and tell, sketch, then write, which is a very scaffolded process that helps make it easier for students who might be new to the writing process or writing workshop to get started. And so we ask them to come up with trouble stories. And trouble stories could be times where, yes, times where you got in trouble, but maybe times when you faced trouble, like a challenge, something that was hard, because that's what makes for good stories. And as we also say in the project, a story is a story is a story, so we also teach kids very early on that stories have a particular structure, and this is actually a way to help give all kids access. When kids are familiar with how stories go, whether it's somebody wanted this, but then this, or a character has wants and desires and encounters a problem and they work to resolve that problem, it can help students know that there's a predictable sort of pathway along which to write your story that's going to make it really engaging. And so we encourage with a very simple story structure to get started out with, where on one page the trouble starts and on the next page the trouble gets worse, and on the last page the trouble ends. And in the meantime, students can add more pages as they go along.

The first bend, writing and revising trouble stories, we go back and forth between generating ideas and then doing a quick revision of those ideas. So we're channeling to write and revise several pieces at once—they're generating a lot of

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stories. They might fancy up one toward the end of the bend. But it's a one-week, a week and a day bend. It's a really quick bend.

In bend two, we move students toward a fun genre, which is writing realistic fiction stories. And students just fall in love with this genre. You get a chance to write trouble stories that seem real, and so you pick a character that's kind of like you, and you imagine real problems that the character might face. And what bend two does is it emulates the same structure of bend one: generate ideas, revise; generate another idea, revise. And when you generate additional ideas for this bend, what you'll be doing is you'll be almost creating a series for that character, almost like a Frog and Toad or a Pinky & Rex. And in fact, some of the mentor texts we use for this bend include the Poppleton book, the Poppleton series, which is actually kind of tricky to write. I got a chance to take a class with Sarah Weeks at Teachers College, and she encouraged us to write stories that are along the line of Poppleton, and it's quite a challenge. And again, a fun challenge for students who are doing the Up the Ladder series.

In bend three, we transfer students who have been working in booklets of three to five pages, transferring over into the writing notebook. And here's where we start to channel students to live the writerly life, and this is sort of the classic famous thing that we do in writing workshop, which is where you carry a notebook alongside you just like the professional writers do. A professional writer has a place where she might store her ideas, almost like a little compost site where things can start to grow. And in this writing notebook, we show students that the things that you learned in the first two bends, you can apply them to your notebook. You can still do touch and tell, sketch then write, in a notebook. And we also channel students to write more small moments, which is also a classic thing. We want kids to write a small moment, right, and we want them to stretch it so that later on in the units of study they might write more chapters of stories and things of that nature.

And then we channel students to start generating ideas, to rehearse those ideas, and then to move out into drafting paper and going through the revision and the editing and the publishing, much like the units of study series do. And so that last bend is that bend that takes them from a lot of accessibility to, "Here you are, you're going to get ready for the units of study series and you're going to be writing. You're going to have a lot of fun doing it."

Specifically, the Up the Ladder narrative unit can help each grade, three to six. For instance, bend three is a great sort of springboard into the third grade small moment unit where students do the same thing: they're in a notebook, they have all this fanfare, and they generate ideas. And so bend three, writing small moments, connects very closely to the third grade book. The Up the Ladder series is also going to get students ready for the fourth grade realistic fiction book, so they'll have some experience writing realistic fiction, but they'll also have some experience writing

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some personal narrative, which is, it's much easier to write about yourself first than before you write about a fictional character. And same, too, for the fifth and sixth grade narrative units. Bend three is going to be that bridge between the accessible sort of writing process into living the writerly life and how we take students through that, as well.