

How do we lead students to own the qualities of strong informational writing?

- **Study forms** that will engage & lead to success for all students (research what interests students: words, favorite teams, places, etc.; explain how an object of yours (baseball, bike, book) reveals who you are; explain your reading life—teach someone why these books are your favorites; unwritten rules of something you know well: the cafeteria, the playground, chores at your house; be the expert: show how something works like walking a badly-behaving dog or making cookies without eggs or other key ingredients or the best way to get your younger siblings to behave when you’re the babysitter; definitions: an excellent opportunity to practice playful language and thinking together; how to survive summer camp, or grocery shopping with Grandma, or summer boredom; “you should know” biographies of people or places you admire or know a lot about)
- **Students who choose** their passions write better, pay more attention to revision and work to solve their own problems in writing. The more we engage students in their topics, the less dependent they are on us
- **Define the audience** who will read their work (beyond school)
- **“Several laps around the track”** allow students to practice skills in mastering the text structure and ways to convey ideas, then repeat what they’ve learned and improve on the next topic, then begin to move beyond a form to larger understandings of the qualities of informative writing (repetition with the individual skills = retention.) During one unit of study (a month at first) in this form, students should create 3-4 texts that represent different text structures, but have similar expectations about the qualities of writing that informs or explains: they lead with information & develop that information with facts; they seek a connection with a reader; they establish the author’s credibility; they are thorough, and use vocabulary specific to content; they are organized logically and make use of formatting to assist the reader’s understanding.
- **Frequently study texts together** and name qualities of a text, adding to class understandings on an anchor chart to practice analytical reading & keep a record of what a good informational text includes. It is critical that students lead this practice of noticing and naming text qualities in order to develop confidence and independence as critical readers and writers.
- **Create anchor charts** of understandings for your classroom that remain in place throughout the unit—anyone should be able to walk into your classroom and know what you’re studying and how today connects to yesterday & tomorrow. These are created each time you introduce a unit and added to throughout the unit. Do not create one, laminate, and use again. Students must own these charts and they should represent their language & ideas.

- **Name the craft that you see in good writing that explains:** the vivid details that define a problem or explain something's worth; the attention to word choice; the voice of a authority that carries a piece and makes readers listen, shows the writer has done his research; intentional word choice that makes complex things easier to understand. You should study the texts you share with students, noting what makes the text work well. You are building your own understanding as well as preparing for the discussion with students in class.
- **Frame the year of study** for students, showing how qualities of writing and skills and forms are related to each other & how students will gather skills and larger understandings from one unit to the next. It is important to show narrative skills as we teach informational writing: the use of specific details, etc. Students remember when they can link ideas together.

Quick Writes:

- Use short texts that explain or inform—short texts, big messages—like poetry to reinforce the idea that there are many forms of writing that explain and inform an audience = a bigger picture of the genre and the way all writing is connected
- Short documentary movies on news web sites are excellent ways to engage students in informational texts. They will discover their own topics and unwrap the way information is presented in different media. Write what you're thinking in response to viewing.
- Write quickly about one part of your topic in your notebook, creating a 'flash draft' for one section. The teacher should model this with her/his topic. Then revise this short sub-topic with an attention to writing craft. Connect these notebook entries in unusual or surprising ways to imagine structures for the whole text.
- Quickly write in imitation of a mentor text form ("Six Things You Should Know About" from *ESPN* magazine or *Not-for-parents PARIS*); day two take one element of the quick write and expand it or refine it, showing how the rethinking of writing often improves it.
- Quick writing is effective for partners; collaborative writing is a powerful teaching tool (Try on topics together: what every 5th grader needs to know; why fifth graders need cell phones; things that should never be seen in a lunchbox; "Five reasons dogs should come to school" etc.)
- Revise quick writing "make it better" as daily practice in rereading & attention to craft: "Habit makes writing easy." ~Don Murray

Revision focus:

- Reread your writing and find: your best phrases, lines; the line that is the heart of what you're trying to say; a place where you can make it better writing; a place where you can add information to strengthen the idea; a place where you have more to say; then write just from that place...
- Post best sentences, crafty word choice, celebrate small victories
- Pay attention to the power of voice: what exactly makes you want to keep reading? Find it in a mentor text, find it in the teacher model, find it in your own writing.
- Where can you insert humor? Invite readers into thinking and engagement

Sentence Study (is powerful when chosen from mentor texts in unit):

- This work is ideal for partners—collaborative writing is one of 11 best strategies for teaching writing skills (*Writing Next*)
- Practice skills like creative ways to list several elements of your topic (vary verbs, for example), how to combine ideas into one sentence, how to break down a complex idea into parts using transitional words like first, next, then, etc.
- Mentor students to samples from texts you study together during this unit: zoom in on one sentence & practice together
 - Example: sentences that group information
 - **“Dash and description”** (zooms in on details that *show* (a narrative skill that is often used in argument); the dash creates emphasis)
 - I stared at my father’s photograph—his thin face stern, lips latched tight, his eyes peering permanently to the right. ~Paul Fleischman, *Seedfolks*.
 - I studied my new printer—the instruction manual written by a scientist, the confusing menus and buttons, *failure to print* lit up on its control panel.
- Strong opening and closing lines—how writers of information often bring the piece full circle through images or ideas that repeat in the piece and are brought back at the end
- Study frames for texts (images and visuals, ideas and sub-topics, questions answered and questions that aren’t answered)
- Transition phrases and sentences: how does a writer move the reader to an understanding of this topic or concept?

Mentor Texts:

- It makes a difference when a student (or the entire class) chooses a text as a *mentor*—makes the deliberate decision to mentor their writing to the model—after introducing several, you might ask students to choose one that will be their mentor for this draft
- Choose anchor texts for whole class to *read closely together* that are good models of the informational texts or letters you want students to write: consider *Letters from a Nut*, picture books that teach information, textbook entries
- Mix published author texts with grade level strong student texts, especially those from the grade level above to give students a goal to reach towards
- The teacher process in writing an essay to explain or inform is a model for the class, including the first quickly-written draft (even unfinished). Students are most engaged when the text is created in front of them. You might start the first few lines in front of students, then finish during planning time. Try not to spend more time on this than the quick-writing time you give students in class. You do not have to create a perfect text.
- Use storyboarding to help students think flexibly about organization of informative writing: seek unusual publications on the web and in student magazines like *National Geographic for Kids*, *Time for Kids*, etc.
- Consider the study of one author’s work through several texts (this is easy with picture books that teach & allows students to organize thinking about the writer: Cynthia Rylant uses beautiful words, etc. We want students mentored to authors and their processes.)
- Teach students how to annotate what they see in a text by showing them how you annotate the craft you see as you read. Practice this in every genre as you read aloud. You are teaching reading and writing with this practice.

- Read, analyze (study), write and share together—your model is critical at every stage of the process in this and every writing unit.

Goals for collaborative writing or independent practice:

- When in the unit will students be ready for independent/collaborative work time? Can one of the drafts written this month be done in partners?
- How many days per week/minutes per day for independent writing? I suggest time every day of at least 20 minutes. Define clear expectations for this time.
- What are your exit tickets or other expectations for productivity during workshop?
- Structure and manage individual & small group conferences so you can teach into the intentions of individual students—your most powerful teaching opportunity. You teach students to be independent if you are not always available to solve problems.
- Define your expectations for peer work, lead students in this work—perhaps all will publish imitation sentences on the white board, or perhaps students will meet in groups to discuss drafts or write together one day.

Assessment opportunities:

- Quick writes/notebook grades = good faith effort to write & revise each day **& at home**
 - Evidence of revision, sentence imitations, write the entire time to build stamina
- Annotations on a mentor text can highlight particular understandings & each student can show evidence of that understanding
- Collaborative work on sentence imitation, revision, or annotation of texts
- Exit slips at the end of workshop to clarify learning: one sentence to show...
- Writing conferences (teacher or peer) are assessment opportunities, keep records
- For YOU: the unit plan; which mentor texts were successful; which quick write invitations produced greatest engagement; the productivity of workshop time—use these lessons to plan your next unit in this form

Final product (last draft) evaluation:

- Will you grade content, process, and mechanics separately?
- Will particular focus skills be graded with more weight than others?
- How will you use a rubric or a list of qualities to teach & clarify expectations?
- *Optional* but important student self-assessment questions:
 - How did you find your topic? How did you sustain interest in it? (Students should name what they've learned about their own process as writers)
 - What did you learn from a mentor text that helped you write with more purpose and skill? (This helps you evaluate models you are using)
 - How did conferences (teacher, peer) assist in your development as a writer? (Excellent opportunity for teacher feedback & reflection)
 - Explain your revision process. (Students highlight revisions & tell why)
 - Considering the qualities of strong informational writing that we discussed in workshop, how would you evaluate your learning in this unit?
 - If you had weeks more to spend working on this piece, how would you improve it? (Writing is not finished, it's just due.)

A Year of Writing: narrative, informational, persuasive, poetic

In my plan informational writing is first taught as a 4-week unit in November (after two units on narrative & establishing workshop expectations), then taught again in February when students write Historical Fiction (narrative + informational writing combined), then taught again in April when students explore the many forms of poetry, then students show how they have internalized the understandings of this unit in the multi-genre project May/June which will include an informational text. Four opportunities to practice the skills in informational writing will lead students to confidence.

CCSS grade 5: Write informative/explanatory texts to **examine** a topic and convey ideas and information clearly. (gr. 6 = Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, *concepts*, and information *through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.*)

- a. Introduce a topic clearly, provide a general observation and focus, and group related information logically; include formatting (e.g., headings), illustrations, and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension. (gr. 6 = *using strategies such as definition, classification, comparison/contrast, and cause/effect; include graphics (e.g., charts, tables)*)
- b. Develop the topic with (gr. 6 = *relevant*) facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples related to the topic.
- c. Link ideas within and across categories of information using words, phrases, and clauses (e.g., *in contrast, especially*) (gr. 6 = *Use appropriate transitions to clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts.*)
- d. Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.
- e. Provide a concluding statement or section related to the information or explanation presented.
- f. (gr. 6 only: *Establish and maintain a formal style.*)

Other important expectations in the CCSS for writing in grades 5-6 that you will build into your units of study:

1. *Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.* (Informational texts are ideal for this kind of research, short and focused on a student's questions.)
2. *Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revision, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.* (Notebook work should emphasize regular practice with these skills: read, write, & revise every day.)

3. Build stamina. *Grade 5 should be able to type a minimum of two pages in a single sitting. Grade 6 should be able to type a minimum of three pages in a single sitting.* We will build stamina through flash drafts and notebook work.
4. *Provide a list of sources, bibliographic information.*
5. *Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection & revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two—think of notebooks and flash drafts) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes and audiences.* (You will provide this regular practice as an expectation of daily workshop. Gather for notebook writing, (expect more practice at home) & prompt their writing with ideas, poetry, short texts, or discussion. Keep prompts as wide-open as possible to allow for rich student engagement and thinking.)

Now put **the template for thinking** about a unit of study with **specific skill-focused teaching that is responsive to the students you are teaching**. The art of teaching writing rests on a teacher’s continued engagement with the progress of writers in the room. It is not a sequence of lessons that must be followed as I’ve listed below in my initial thinking, but rather, a plan that helps me prepare for the unit and set targets for learning. My plan will be revised as the students demonstrate learning or the need for more practice.

First week, first time teaching informational writing

Note: As defined by the CCSS, informational writing is not persuasive. Many forms in our world blend the two, so it is important to pay attention to this as you search for mentor texts. We will show how the two are blended during the Multi-genre unit at the end of the year, but in this first unit, choose texts that have an overall purpose of teaching about a topic that is important to the writer. This writing will have topics and sub-topics (headings & sub-headings), may include glossaries or text boxes or sidebars, diagrams, charts, tables, photographs, etc. but does not try to persuade the reader of a point of view.

I start by listing key teaching points for my unit.

Launch the unit with an on-demand assessment of all writers.

I need to know what my students know in order to align my instruction to their weaknesses. I bring students back to this piece at the end of the unit to aid in their reflection on learning.

From broad, generic topics to zoom in on specifics, writing with greater density

Help students see the value in narrowing a topic. (You can use the mentor text we shared with students to show the difference in gathering information about one architectural feature of Paris rather than “Paris” as a topic)

Teach students to group information into categories, then sub-categories

Consider the progression of the unit here. Students will write 4-8 short informational texts with 2-4 categories & 2-4 sub-categories. Some will be ready to write much more. I read the writers in the room to determine these goals. I want all to write focused, well-developed (categories + sub-categories) informational texts with vivid language and details by the end of the unit.

Analyze the power of the writer's voice to engage the reader

It is important to choose mentor texts that have different voices: funny, wise, serious, or playful. I highlight this as we study texts initially and then repeat throughout the month. If I choose only serious texts, all students write in serious voices and may miss an opportunity to discover confidence in a variety of writing voices (We all have them.) This unit helps students define voice with confidence and increasing clarity.

Notice similarities in the mentor texts you choose. Repetition aids in retention.

If you present three glossaries in the first week and have all students work to create a short text with a glossary of terms, all writers should be successful with this. The goal is narrow and achievable over a short period of time. Once writers have control over this, you could share a more complex mentor text that also includes a glossary, allowing students to build on their understanding. In the second or third week, you might introduce mentor texts that are structured in several different ways to provide vision for your most advanced writers. You can also provide more complex mentor texts in a binder in the room for advanced writers to refer to and reach for earlier in the month. I try to know my writers well and then nudge them a little farther than they think they can go.

Create a bridge between reading and writing this month.

My book talks this month are informational texts. I ask all students to find one to read this month, leading them to transfer their thinking about texts as mentors to longer, more complex texts they read by choice.

Informational Texts for booktalks & mentor text study grades 3-6:

The Ology Series (*Mythology, Egyptology, Oceanology, Alienology*)

The Seymour Simon books (*Weather, The Brain, Solar System, Tornadoes*)

Can we Save the Tiger? by Martin Jenkins

Frogs, Lizards, Red Eye Tigers, by Nic Bishop

Scientists in Field Series (*Talking Trash, Deep-Sea Volcanoes, Elephant, Whaling Season*)

Trapped by Marc Aronson

Thunderbirds by Jim Aronsky

In Your Face: Facts about your Features, The Bug Scientist by Donna M. Jackson

Lonely Planet *Not For Parents Paris (London, New York, Rome)*

Don't Touch that Toad & Other Strange Things Adults Tell You by Kevin Sylvester

You Wouldn't Want to Be series (*On the Mayflower, Pyramid Builder, Boston Tea Party, Knight*)

It's Disgusting and We Ate It by James Solheim

Kakapo Rescue: Saving the World's Strangest Parrot by Sy Montgomery

Have a vision for publishing student work. Share it.

I look for audiences beyond our classroom, although writers benefit from reading what those in the classroom write, of course. We keep student texts bound into a class anthology, but I also make connections to other teachers, other grade levels, and have even arranged with our local Starbucks to display student work and invite comments on Post-its we leave beside it. As Lucy Calkins said, “One thing is for sure—students knowing that their books will be handled and read by other readers (not just read aloud to other readers, but that individual, interested readers will turn the pages themselves, lingering over the words and images) really increases the intensity, and thus their stamina and zeal for doing high-level work.”

Lessons:

Plan to include a book talk each day, add sentence study into notebook work twice a week to focus on conventions, and have regular writing conferences during this entire unit.

DAY ONE

Text Study: I talk about all I learn in non-fiction reading, including those books and magazines I have read recently. I want to make this an exciting genre.

Students are each given a student sample (I collect examples of student work in each unit, but if you do not have any, I would suggest you gather 12-15 mentor texts and make a copy of each so only two writers in the room will have the same text.) We are going to swim in texts today and notice how they are written, organized, what and how they teach. They will gather with a partner and share what they noticed, expanding their thinking as their partner shares. This also works to expand into groups of 4 to share different texts and the things they noticed together. Groups make a list of what they noticed and bring those back to our gathering place. We put group lists up as an anchor chart of what we’ve noticed about informational texts.

Notebook work: list several things you know a lot about. This should take just a few minutes. Stress that students should feel they know a lot about the topic and are interested in writing about it. “If I had to teach something to the students in this class, what would I teach? What am I an expert in?”

Model this. I want students to record both topics and possible sub-topics, so I will demonstrate:

I list in front of students: playing the guitar, ~~taking care of a dog~~, ~~playing tennis~~, curling, skiing, living in the mountains, ~~making cookies~~. I cross out ones I’m not interested enough in, or as I explain with tennis, it has been a long time since I’ve played, so I’m probably not as expert as I think I am anymore. I reread my topics and begin branching off, adding sub-topics that might be places to explore more.

Curling: learning to read the ice to see how the stone will curl; cost of equipment; history of the sport; glossary of terms since there is much vocabulary to learn. I talk aloud throughout this process, adding my thinking, trying on what I know and what I would have to research to add information to my piece. (I’m cautious here. I want students writing from topics they know a great deal about at the start. Research can get in the way of writing fluency and be a perfect hiding place for someone who doesn’t want to write. The focus of this unit is writing, not researching.)

Workshop: Students will work on listing and writing as much as they can about what they know today. They can also read and study mentor texts for this unit which will be all over the room. I will be circling and conferring and encouraging writing. I will also make notes about what I noticed to share with students: sharing topics, sharing how writers are getting to work,

sharing how I saw students paying attention to the craft of texts, etc. Closure will center on sending them home with more thinking and writing to do.

DAY TWO

Text Study: I will choose 2-4 pages to study as a class. First, they will notice and name features of the text independently, annotating the text. I will have taught them this in narrative and will not model again today unless I feel this class needs it. We will then gather in partners and share what we noticed, then gather as a class.

Notebooks: We will work on expanding writing today. Some students will find they do not know much about a topic and want to choose another. We call this revising our topic choice and it is a natural move for writers. I will pay attention during workshop when this happens and make note of it to share it with the class. I tell students it takes courage to abandon something you've started working on and start again, but how wise it is to know if the topic is a good fit before you put a lot of energy into the writing.

I will model how to expand what I know and ask myself questions I can research later.

DAY THREE

Consider focus and audience. What am I trying to teach? Do I want to present curling as a fun sport? Do I want readers to increase their respect for the sport?

Notebook work. Students will begin writing about their categories and sub-topics in their writing notebooks. I have students put the category or sub-category at the top of a page and then have them freely write all they know about that category. The goal is discovery drafting and thinking, and they may write about these in any order. Lots of writing is the goal for these first few days.

We will stop mid-workshop and have **rereading and revising times**, building on the work students did in narrative in our first two months. They can select a strategy from our "make it better" chart or simply reread and improve it. I make a big deal about revising all throughout our workshop.

DAY FOUR

Make a plan for your piece. This is an excellent time to introduce a **Table of Contents**, study them in books, and model one for your writing. Writers can always revise this plan, but creating one can help bring new energy to a topic as writers share and respond to what others in class are studying and expanding upon.

DAY FIVE

Study and practice a particular text feature. If you began this unit with a focus on glossaries, it is smart to add this to notebook work. Have students keep a list of unusual or difficult vocabulary on a separate page in their notebook. It is smarter to have students keep this list while writing instead of rereading looking for words later.

During workshop I will ask students to teach all they know about their subject to a partner and have the partner keep track of questions they would like answered. These partners will be together for the remainder of the unit. I will keep track of questions I overhear as I listen in and share those at the closure of workshop to spur the thinking and writing for homework.

DAY SIX-NINE

Notebooks: We read and respond to charts, tables, and graphs, and consider how they can be used in our informational texts for the next three days. After today's lesson exploring the features of these visuals, I will do this as notebook work for several days in a row and then expect all students to include a visual of information in their final work for the unit.

Lesson day seven: Practice paraphrasing from research. I model the thinking I do as I read information, then try to restate it in my own words. I model the difference between copying (correctly with quotation marks and an introduction to the quote: according to the *New York Times*...) and paraphrasing. All students practice this during workshop. My model of this thinking is the mini-lesson, but I ask all students to practice during workshop since some will need to get their hands on research texts to practice. This can be a goal that I check off during the week as well. I am conferring regularly with students so several things will be checked in this time: organization of information in notebook, glossary, elaboration on topics, etc.

Lesson day eight: Create a bibliography of sources consulted. Students put the title on one page in the notebook and keep track of their sources there as they begin researching. I give them a format for recording this (title, author, date of publication, page consulted). In today's lesson we study how they are formatted in books we are reading and it helps remind students to update these as they find information, including interviewing experts on their topics (like the student who wrote about best school lunches and interviewed the cafeteria workers.)

Lesson day nine: using photographs and sketches to enliven the final draft. Students will choose two informational texts to study illustrations. Students should share findings with partners and small groups and come together as a class to share understanding.

DAY TEN

Mentor Text Strategy Search. I do this search half way through the month. I ask students to read and notice what they have learned about informational writing that they can see in the text they are studying. They will notice how much they have grown as analytical readers and as writers during this unit. They will then gather with a partner and share what they noticed, expanding their thinking as their partner shares. I will ask all writers to make a plan for their work: what information do they need to gather or add to?

Depending on your writers, you might decide that students are finished with their topics and ready to move on to another 'lap around the track' in this genre, starting the cycle over with a new topic. I also like watching partners create texts together.

Studying the features of an introduction. Our focus is on making our texts as engaging as possible. *Note:* we draft information in categories before we discuss an introduction. We continue to draft and revise and research and collect before we begin putting the whole together. I work from parts to a whole in the first unit on writing in a genre.

DAY ELEVEN:

Storyboards. During the second half of our informational unit, I have students take notecards and label them with their categories and sub-categories of information. I do the same for my topic. I then model for them how I might 'tell the story of the information' in a storyboard, imagining possible structures for the text that lead readers through the information in a logical way. I have taught students to do this with scenes in narrative, so the flexible thinking this relies upon will be familiar. During workshop this day students will share possible

structures with a partner while I listen and make notes of what the class is trying. I end class by having a few students share unusual or interesting structures for their texts.

DAY TWELVE

Crafting Titles and Sub-titles: Playful Language. I teach alliteration and rhythm in this lesson. Great study text: the Lonely Planet Not For Your Parents series. Students work on crafting just titles and sub-titles today. I make a place on the white board or on a chart for students to write titles they find and share with the class. I ask students to seek playful language for homework and bring in examples.

DAY THIRTEEN

Make a chart of types of details that enliven and improve an informational text: facts, definitions, concrete details or anecdotes, quotations, examples, rules, definitions, lift-the-flap features or pull-out maps, etc. Encourage students to select three or more to include in their writing.

It is smart to gather students at the end of workshop today and have another look at their glossary lists in partner groups. This reinforces your expectation, gives direction for homework if a student missed starting the glossary during workshop earlier in the unit, and gives the writer vision for how other writers are choosing words for the glossary.

DAY FOURTEEN

Features of a conclusion. I bring a conclusion for my piece to the class and revise it with them, showing how a conclusion should bring the information together and leave the reader thinking. We list and study transition words and look for them in our writing. All students will draft a conclusion today. You can have them share in partners, then collect and respond to their writing with encouragement and interest.

DAYS FIFTEEN-SEVENTEEN

These are final production days with a focus on proofreading and editing and finishing touches. I teach students how to proofread line by line, reading out loud to hear the sound of their words.

Make plans as a class to celebrate the finished products and share with others. The CCSS recommends using technology for sharing. Consider blogs, wikis, pbworks.com, etc.

DAY EIGHTEEN

I bring out the pre-assessment and ask students to notice the differences between their writing of four weeks ago and the finished product. This is the time to consider the reflective questions listed at the start of the unit. Helping students articulate what they have learned is important.

“Ultimately kids learn through the work they do, not the words out of your mouth.”

Lucy Calkins