

Units of Study in Phonics, Grades K—2
By Lucy Calkins and TCRWP Colleagues

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Question: *How do the phonics units help teachers synthesize instruction across the reading and writing units of study?*

Amanda Hartman:

So I think that there are several ways in which these new units of study and phonics connect and support with reading and writing units of study, and I think I'm going to just talk about five main, most important ways I think that they connect to help us think about how phonics, as a component of balanced literacy, is really helping students with the bigger reading and writing work.

So the first way that I think that is important to think about how they connect, is that each unit of study in phonics, the theme of which the unit is centered around, or the story line that the teachers and the kids are investigating, have a similar theme in reading and writing units of study. So that when students are in word detectives in reading in first grade as a reading unit of study, so too are they in word detectives phonics unit of study so that the theme carries across the day, so that it's not seen as two different times. It's really seen as a connected time in the day.

The same also with, say, when readers are studying nonfiction reading and writing in the classroom. The phonics work is also centered around informational reading and writing. And so this connection for kids is really helpful so that it's seen as all day long, working on these bigger ideas, and that phonics is also attached to not just learning letters and sounds, but being readers and writers, and readers and writers of books that teach us information about the world. So it actually elevates the content and the work and the purpose and the drive behind study.

I think along those lines of theme work in a unit, the units of study in reading and writing are built around a progression to move from beginning reading and writing skills to more sophisticated skills, both in terms of how they solve words, how they think about texts, how they spell and get words down on the page. And so, as the units of study in reading and writing build a progression of development for students, of skill development in reading and writing, so too do the units of study in phonics. We really try to think about the progression of phonics from phonemic awareness, all the way to learning letters and sounds, to thinking about phonograms, and setting a progression for students to build more complicated phonics as the year progresses.

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And so we've tried to align what students would need for their reading and writing to match where students are in their reading and writing units, so that the phonics work helps to supplement, helps to give kids extra and more practice around the spelling and the word solving aspect to those units.

I think a third way that these units are connected is, of course, also thinking about workshop structure. So when I've been in reading and writing workshops, I know that there's a mini lesson for students, there's practice and work time for the students, and then there's a share session for students. And so when we look at phonics, phonics won't take on a new structure or a different structure for kids. Rather, kids will also be in a mini lesson. Kids will have some rug time or some practice time with partnerships and with small groups, and then there'll be a share session. It won't last for 45 minutes. It'll be half of that, like about 20 minutes, but I think that the structure, especially for teachers, and for kids in terms of consistency, is a really important connection that these units will help to make.

And when we think about units of study in reading and writing workshops, of course, we also mean components of balanced literacy. So in our reading units of study, we have a whole section at the back of each unit on how to teach shared reading and kind of suggest a five day template that helps teachers to plan and think about shared reading that would support the working units of study in reading. And so the phonics work that we're doing, some of those mini lessons and sessions, actually connect with the work that could be happening in our shared reading, and also in our interactive writing time. So I think another really important connection and support is that for our other components of balanced literacy, like shared reading and interactive writing, our phonics units of study can also support the planning and classroom practice in those components too.

And then lastly, I would say that the last thing, which may be the most important thing, is that when we're thinking about supporting reading and writing units of study, we're always trying to think about how to transfer skills from our components into students' independent and partner reading and book club reading and independent writing during workshop time, so that phonics, shared reading, read aloud, and interactive writing are all things that help kids practice the skills that we ultimately want our students to use with independence while they read and while they write.

So transfer is really important inside these units of study of phonics. It's one of the things that we thought probably the most about, is how, when we're teaching kids about phonics, especially in isolation, how to put it back into students' own reading and writing so that they can practice and to use and to think about those

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skills that they learn outside of reading and writing and workshop and use inside. So the phonics units use students' independent reading books and students' writing that they create in writing workshop inside of phonics so that students don't see the two things as isolated events, but rather see both things as complimentary. And so we use what we learn in phonics in reading and writing workshop. And in phonics we use our reading and writing to help think about words in context, to help us compose, and to help us while we edit and reread our own writing as readers.