

*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 do we mean when we talk about the UTL units giving kids access to the UOS?*

**Mike Ochs:**

The great thing about access is access means everybody, really. You think of buildings, who are modern buildings for? They're for everybody. You might enter in different ways; some might enter through the ground level floor, some might go up a set of stairs, some might go up a ramp, but the building is for everyone. And that's the idea about the Up the Ladder Units is that the books are really for everyone. They're about giving access to, not only the Units of Study in writing, but also access to the writing process.

Writing presents a huge cognitive load for writers who might be less experienced or have a less automaticity with their writing who are newer to the writing process or the Units of Study. Your brain has to do a lot of things when you write. First, you have to think about, "What is it that I'm going to write about?" which can be a roadblock in and of itself. Then, you have to manipulate a tool in your hand using your fingers, and then the third thing you have to do is you have to create these shapes that are supposed to have meaning to somebody else. There's a lot going on in the brain that happens at once. Experienced writers, they do this with automaticity; they know how to hold the tool, they know how to make the shapes to have meaning to other people, and they can focus on the, "What is it that I'm going to write about?" What the Up the Ladder series does is it helps break down that process a little bit so that it reduces the cognitive load. Basically, it makes it easier so that students, writers, can gain that automaticity so that they become more fluent, more automatic writers.

For instance, in the Up the Ladder narrative book we start with a writing process that goes touch and tell, sketch then write. What that does is it incorporates a lot of different aspects of you're touching a piece of paper, and you're going to say what happens on this page, and they're going to say it loud. Oral rehearsal is a very effective way to get something into your short term memory a little bit. Human beings have been talking for tens of thousands of years. We like it. We're good at it. Using talk in your writing as a way to start is a super effective way to get that process going. You touch, you say what you're going to write. You do it a few times, and then you sketch. Sketching something on the page reduces the cognitive load in that you no longer have to think, "What is it that I'm writing about again? What was I going to say?" because you can look to that sketch and be like, "Oh, that's right. I

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was going to write about the party at the park," or whatever it was. And then, once you've done that you're ready to write and you can focus on making those shapes that are supposed to have meaning to other people.

And by the way, this is a process that everyone can use. I use this. If I need to write something, I orally rehearse it and say, "Here's what I'm going to say on these different pages," and sometimes I'll sketch something out. This is something that's really good for profession writers too. What this does is, is it helps students get ready for the Units of Study which are ambitious in a fun challenging way but they're a good challenge, and the Up the Ladder series gets all students ready for that. If you're a writer who's new to writing workshop or new to the Units of Study or new to the writing process, the Up the Ladder is a good fit.