

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

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

Hareem Atif Khan:

Information writing is, for kids, can be an incredibly confusing thing. On the one hand, we expect that kids will be able to communicate content, which means they've got to be knowledgeable about the content. For example, if I have to do information writing about something like the American Revolution or I have to do information writing in which I teach my reader all about civil rights movement or about immigration, I need to know a ton of content before I can write. On one hand, there's this cognitive challenge of I need to be knowledgeable about the content of what I'm communicating. On the other hand, what does it mean to be a good information writing? What is the craft involved? What are the qualities of good information writing? That's a double cognitive challenge. Especially for students who have not gone through the third grade unit of study book where they're asked to write about a topic of personal expertise.

What the Up The Ladder information book does is that it really says to kids, "You know what? Take a topic that you know well." It might be something that you spend a lot of your time doing. It might be something that grownups rely on you for. It might be something that ... It might be a place that you've spent a lot of your time. It's interesting to see because a lot of energy is generated around just what am I good at? What do I really know? You know what? I'm going to write an information book about that. It takes half of that cognitive load away. If I'm writing about dogs and I've got a dog at home, and if I'm writing about going to Guatemala because that's where I was the entire summer break, well, I know more about Guatemala than my teacher does.

On the one hand, it taps into local funds of knowledge because you'll have kids writing about topics that are not on the school curriculum. For example, we have kids from Sri Lanka who wrote beautiful information books about Sri Lanka. In the process you realize it wasn't just that they were getting better at information writing; the fact is that they could now write an information book about a topic that they knew so well and that they had permission to actually go out and choose a topic, and it wasn't just one topic. They could write three, four information books around a myriad of topics that they felt like they knew.

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You see kids being really excited about the topic. Under the umbrella of that, what the book teaches them to do in a way that accelerates their understanding and ability to tackle some of the harder work in later grades is it teaches them what are the qualities of good information writing. You maybe writing about ROBLOX or Marvel comics or about Minecraft or about how to make slime or about chess, by the way, I'm not making any of these topics up. These are information books, fascinating information books that kids have created. You see them going back and revising by adding much more, by adding text features, by adding little diagrams and timelines and how-to sections and dedicating this book to their dog or dedicating this book to their friend who got them the first ingredients that they ever had for slime. Then you see they're making their page design match their content, and in the process they're structuring their piece.

Then they're thinking, "Who's the audience for my book? What are the kinds of questions that this audience will tend to have? So if I'm writing for people my own age, they might have very different questions from if I'm writing for grownups who knew nothing about slime or Minecraft or this cool new app that I'm into." This awareness of audience and knowing and anticipating here are the questions that my audience is going to have. Let me write accordingly. It brings an authenticity to information writing that you don't typically get to see if you start with something like, "Okay, you're going to write about the American Revolution." It feels like there's already a ton of information books about the American Revolution. You know what? When I'm researching that I'm realizing that anything I can say about the American Revolution some other book has already said I better.

I remember being in grade school trying to write information books about the French Revolution and thinking, "You know what? Maybe if I take a sentence from here and if I take a sentence from here and if I take a sentence from there and I cobble it together I basically plagiarized and got a zero on a report that it'll haunt me forever. We've tried very hard to get kids to own information writing. The way this accelerates their entry into units of study in the upper grades is that once they can do it for Minecraft they know how to organize their thinking, they know how to create a table of contents, they know how to write an introduction, how to hook the reader, how to anticipate the kinds of questions that readers will ask, how to conduct an interview or a survey, how to plan their book, how to go back and revise their book, then they can pretty much do it with any topic because they've got that practice on a topic that they know so well. It really is helping them up the ladder towards much more formal academic information writing.