

*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 opinion unit and how will that prepare them for grade-level opinion writing?*

**Kelly Boland Hohne:**

Up the Ladder Opinion Writing begins when one starts with getting kids to bring in collections and to have opinions about those collections and to write, to explain their opinions. So they have collections and they're awarding awards to items in the collection and then they're writing about that. So it's really engaging and fun and physical, and when they're doing that work they're making claims, and then they're expected to back up those claims with a reason or two. So the beginning of the unit kind of welcomes them in and lets them approximate doing this work. When they're looking between items in their collection and they're thinking about I'm going to award the cutest cat, they're bringing in stuffed cats, they might be looking at the cat, they might be thinking, "Which one is the fuzziest," or, "Which one has the cutest eyes? Which one has the nicest tail?" They're looking at these different characteristics, and then those become their reasons. Those become the way they back up their claim. The teacher, the demonstration that the teacher is suggested to have, is a collection of dragons. The teacher is modeling it with dragons, and then the kids have their own collections, and at the end of the bend, there's a mini red carpet celebration. Some teachers have actually brought in scraps of red carpet and put it on the floor, and the kids present the award that they feel the strongest about.

Some of the work that's really important to highlight about that first bend is the idea of volume, and kids should be writing up a storm. The volume does not come through the volume of writing one piece. It comes from across pieces, so kids can be awarding first in the collection, second in the collection, worst in the collection, grossest, funniest, cutest. The idea is write a lot, write a lot, write a lot. Then the bend goes into revision, large-scale revision and gets kids to think about not just why did I pick this one, why didn't I pick that one? That's a way of elaborating more. They're taping and they're posting different scraps of paper that have additions on it. So that you can see their revisions physically, they can see their revision physically, and it's all about writing up a storm, revising, going through the process multiple times.

And the second bend is very similar to the first bend, but raises the level. So the second bend's all about writing reviews. And so kids are now going out to review restaurant's, they're reviewing video games, and so as they do that they're

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basically doing the kind of work they did in the first bend, which was writing reviews of collections. And now that they're doing these reviews, we push them to have a claim, at least two reasons, and to say more about a reason. And the way that they can say more is by giving examples, like we have them give personal stories, like, "One reason why this restaurant is so wonderful is the people who work there are so nice. This one time I went out with my family and ... " And we have them interview people who have experienced that restaurant, or that video game, and then include that in as evidence, so that it's really supportive to help them now elaborate on their reasons, and to say more. So that second bend has them write reviews, and at the end they can kind of compile their reviews into different collections. So there's little bit of celebration at the end of each bend, which really kept the energy, and kept the kids excited to keep going.

And then the third bend gets them to make persuasive speeches to make a real world difference. They look around the world, they see something that they really believe needs to be changed, or they want people to appreciate more, and they begin to create persuasive speeches to do that. And that then begins with what we call a boot camp, which is really an oral rehearsal, and getting kids to orally rehearse a structure of opinion, which really helps them to begin to get essay structure in their bones, to feel what it feels like to write an essay. So they're writing this persuasive speech, this one persuasive speech across that bend. And that's the first time that they're working on one piece across the bend. So in bends one and two they're writing up a lot, a lot of pieces, and in bend three they begin to focus on once piece, and to get to the process. So you can see we're kind of raising the level of what they're expected to do.

And then at the end of that third bend, again, a big celebration. And many teachers at that point you can go into your third curriculum, fourth grade curriculum, that comes in the units of study kit, your boxes and bullets in fourth grade, or your changing the world in third grade. However, if you teach fifth or sixth grade, we suggest that you might do this at fourth bend that we have, which is really about getting kids to write opinions and support them with text evidence.

So, they take on a shared cause in that last bend, and we suggest that it be about bottled water. So, it starts out very supportive where the teacher lets them know that another child in a different school or a different class has written piece about bottled water. The teacher's really excited by it, wants to show the kids, and thinks that they could all try to do that do, and we could use that one as the starting point and make it even better. And the idea is that they can work in clubs, they can make a shared speech about bottled water (or of course they could also do it individually too, but we don't want the unit to drag on too long). So that bit is really short, it's only four sessions, and it could be that each child in the club is taking a portion of that. But the heart of that bend is getting kids to read a couple of articles about bottled water, or another topic of your choosing, and then to be pulling some

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text evidence from it, and inserting the text evidence into their opinion writing, or their beginning argument writing. And that is really intended to set them up for the research based argument essay in fifth grade, where kids are writing with essay structure, making arguments, reading articles about topics, and bringing in text evidence into their writing. So that last bend sort of is like a little bit of a running start into that fifth grade essay.