

*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 are some of the ways the UTL units support teachers who are new to the Units of Study series?*

**Hareem Atif Khan:**

I remember when I was a new teacher, despite what people said to me about, "Oh, it's all about the process and not the product," I felt very judged by the product that my kids produced. And I remember jumping in and doing more than just coaching; I would try to coax this perfect product out of my third graders and fourth graders writing pieces. And it wasn't a workshop. And one thing that the Up the Ladder units do is that there are so many products that kids are producing, and there's no chance but that these products are going to be imperfect. They're not going to be perfectly spelled, they're not going to be perfectly punctuated. They may not be perfectly organized, and you know, that's okay, because that's what third graders are doing. However, they're not just making one product, or two products across the unit, they're making five information books across a unit. And so when you put the product side by side, when you say, "Oh, here's the first information book you wrote at the start of the unit, and now if you put all your five books side by side, wow, I see growth." For a new teacher, that's incredibly important to see, is that I've taken this kid across these five steps, and his last booklet looks way better than his first booklet looked.

I think as a new teacher I also felt some stress around how do I teach revision? I remember kids would say, "I'm done," and I would do that mantra, oh, when you're done you've only just begun. And I'm not ashamed to say now, but the kids would groan in my face and say, "Oh, there she is with that again." I knew how to say it, but I didn't know how to get them excited about revision. And so I think that is something that we all have been very cognizant of as we were writing this book, is teaching revision is hard. So, in the information book one of the lessons literally pulls out the bill of rights and says you know what, use this most important document in US history, it's lasted all of these years because guess what, the writers, the founding fathers, revised. And then they went back, and they revised their revisions. And let's study the work they've done, because that's the kind of revision that you will do. The reason their document lives on over 200 years is because of the power of revision.

I think as a new teacher I was also very aware that kids did not want their writing to look messy. Well, revision is messy. And so, give them permission to celebrate the messiness, and know that if things look too perfect, if every

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apostrophe is where it should be, if every sentence is perfectly punctuated, you want to smell a rat, because you want to say well is this really the child's own work at the start of third grade, the start of fourth grade, the start of fifth grade? That's there no error on the page? Things don't come out looking that edited when it's an elementary student's writing. And so the permission to say you know what, we're going to make it messy, we're going to come back, we're going to make it better, we're going to revise, we're going to come back, is everything. Because if you look at the revisions on the bill of rights, that looked messy. We'll have a final piece, and we won't have to maybe re-write that entire piece, maybe I can write a chapter of my book.

So I think the emphasis on revision is much more organic, built into the sessions. Of course, it's also very helpful that it's not "Oh, I have to make a ton of revisions to one piece." When kids are writing multiple pieces, then they draft, revise. Draft, revise. Draft, revise. But each time that you teach them to draft across a new product or a new book that they're writing, it's easier because you're upping the level of what they're doing in their revisions, so that by the time that they're writing book five, they've learned a host of revision strategies that they are now cumulatively bringing to this fifth book. So there's a real sense of oh, I see growth across this.