

## **Research Base**

*Units of Study for Primary Writing, K-2*

*Units of Study for Teaching Writing, grades 3-5*

**TCRWP Writing Curricular Calendars, grades K-8**

The *Units of Study* for primary and intermediate grades arose out of over a decade of in-school research and practice in the New York City Schools that was spearheaded by the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP). Schools that work with the Project join with professional Teachers College educators in a study of the art of teaching writing. Together they study the techniques of master writers, they study the individual students in a teacher's classroom, and together they create a curriculum to lift the level of the students' writing. The TCRWP writing workshop model that evolved from that process is the foundation of *Units of Study*. Its theory of teaching is based upon fostering independent writers and life-long learners. What it offers to schools is somewhat different from what more traditional writing programs may offer.

It is TCRWP's belief that there is not a single string of sequenced lessons that applies to every possible classroom. The lessons must be responsive to the individual needs of the writers in each class. On the other hand, the Project does believe in strong models of excellent instruction for teachers. The sample curriculum offered in *Units of Study for Primary Writing*, and *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3-5* by Lucy Calkins, et. al., published by Heinemann is just such a model. Additionally, detailed descriptions of each unit, supporting lessons, and various other supports for grades K-8 are available on the Project's web site at [readingandwritingproject.com](http://readingandwritingproject.com).

Both the sample curriculum in *Units of Study* and the supplements on the project website are grounded in student work and intended to be tailored and adapted to specific children and classrooms. Both forms of curricular support offer several methods of assessment and

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recommendations for bends to follow in the units based on what teachers learn about their students through assessments—thus assuring a student-centered curriculum.

*Units of Study*—in fact all the pursuits of the Project—are based on a handful of fundamental, research-based principles.

**Research Principle 1**

**There are fundamental traits of all good writing and students write well when they learn to use these traits.**

The foundation of *Units of Study* lies in the understanding that writing is a life-long process during which we continually lift the level of our writing skills and outgrow ourselves as writers. Students learn that all writing has essential traits to which they must attend when developing a piece (Spandel, 2001). Writers learn multiple ways to find topics they wish to write about. They learn to make purposeful decisions about the structure and organization of a piece. They learn a repertoire of methods

for elaborating. They learn to craft their pieces using literary language and devices, and to employ the conventions of written language (Anderson, 2005; Calkins, 1994; Elbow, 1989; Graves, 1994; Wood Ray, 1999).

*Units of Study* is organized into a system of monthly units that move students through both narrative and expository writing each year. In the primary grades, students begin acquiring a repertoire of writing skills to write in many genres. The upper and middle grades revisit and reconstruct these in more formal and purposeful ways. (Bruner, 1960)

Trait-based writing instruction has been shown to raise student performance on standardized writing tests (Jarner, Kozol, Nelson, Salsberry, 2000). Most states have adopted some form of writing assessment on their annual tests (Spandel, 2001). By teaching students ways to clearly reveal their meaning, to structure their writing in accordance with the genre and in ways that affect their reader, to elaborate using a wide repertoire of techniques, to use literary language and devices to make artful pieces of writing, and to use the conventions of written language, *Units of*

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*Study* strengthens the skills of young, apprentice writers and prepares them for academic success. As writers build their knowledge of each trait of writing, they become critical readers of their writing and to set an agenda for themselves and in conjunction with their teacher. (Anderson, 2005; Graves, 1994)

The conventions of written language thread throughout each of our units. Writers learn conventions that they can practice in the pieces they are writing and they learn how using those conventions can help them better convey their meaning to their reader (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983; Weaver, 1997). Research has shown that to be effective, the conventions of writing must be taught within the context of a writer's own writing (Anderson, 2005; Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005; Hillocks, 1986; Weaver, 1997; Wilde, 2007).

**Research Principle 2**

**Using a writing process to teach the complex task of writing increases student achievement.**

Just as professional writers have a process for developing their work, young apprentice writers also benefit from a clear process through which to develop their writing. (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Elbow, 1981; Fletcher, 1993; Graves, 1994; Murray, 1984)

Each unit in *Units of Study* begins with generating ideas for writing. When writers have collected a number of possibilities, they learn ways to choose one idea and begin developing and rehearsing that idea to prepare for the specific genre they will be writing in. They learn to draft using the structure and elaboration techniques that apply to that genre. Writers then learn ways to revise their writing using structure, elaboration, and literary craft moves to further reveal their meaning. Next, writers learn to edit their pieces by employing the conventions of written language. Finally, writers publish their work to share with a community – either their class, their school community, or a community outside their school. Research shows that using a writing process for instruction in the complex task of writing increases student achievement (Hillocks, 1986; Holdzkom, Reed, Porter, & Rubin, 1982; Keech & Thomas, 1979).

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One of the fundamental components of the TCRWP writing process is offering choice to students. Students learn strategies for finding their own topics or ideas for their writing. They learn to set a clear and purposeful meaning they want to convey and multiple ways to structure and craft their piece to reveal that meaning.

**Research Principle 3**  
**Students benefit from teaching that offers direct instruction, guided practice, and independent practice.**

In years past, it was thought that teaching creative writing came from having creative lesson plans. Many of us thought that to be creative we needed ever-changing, complex, and stimulating environments. Each day the structure was different, the work was different. The class room was a whirlwind, a kaleidoscope, and teachers felt very creative. The days were filled with teachers planning, experimenting, revising their plans, and experimenting more. Meanwhile, the students waited on the changing agenda.

They weren't able to plan their own writing, set their own agenda, or take charge of their own learning. Instead they blew in the wind of kaleidoscopic complexity of the writing time (Calkins, 1994). We now know that for writers to develop their own agenda and make their own plans for writing, they benefit most from predictable and simple structures in the writing workshop (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994; Short, Harste, Burke, 1996).

The *Units of Study* writing workshop has three basic structures – the minilesson, independent writing time with conferring and small group work, and the share-sessions at the end of the writing time. These structures support the basis of the writing instruction – providing direct instruction, guided practice as students begin trying their hand at the new learning, and finally independent implementation of the strategies (Vygotsky, 1978).

The minilesson offers students direct instruction on an explicit strategy for writing. The specific strategies for each day are selected by teachers based upon what their assessments have revealed that writers need. During the minilesson, students are asked first to observe a demonstration of the strategy, and then they are asked to try a bit of that strategy right there during the lesson. This

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is a quick, guided practice for students in which they can receive immediate feedback from both their classmates and their teacher. The minilesson is short, usually around ten minutes long (Calkins, 1994; Fletcher, 1993; Graves, 1994).

Students then move into their independent writing time which constitutes the bulk of time in the writing workshop. Students independently practice the strategies for writing they have learned in writing workshop. During this time, the teacher meets individually with students for a writing conference or meets with three to six students for small group work. Conferences and small group work provide students with individualized instruction based upon each student's need. They receive both direct instruction and guided practice time during these sessions (Atwell, 1989; Anderson 2000, 2005; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994).

The share-session at the end of class provides students with an opportunity to share and support work in progress. Students may share their writing with a partner or small group and get feedback on a question they pose to them. The teacher may use the share time to teach an additional lesson that builds upon or further develops the strategy introduced during the minilesson. The class may come together to look at a piece of writing from a professional writer and read it together to gather ideas for what they themselves might try in their own pieces. Ultimately, the share-session is a time for writers to come together to share their writing, explore possibilities, and make plans for what they will do next with their writing (Calkins, 1994).

**Research Principle 4**

**To write well, writers  
need ample time to  
write every day.**

Writers need to write frequently and in many different genres to gain independent control of what they are learning about writing well. The National Reading Panel (2000) reiterated this point.

Writers need frequent opportunities to practice their craft, learning how to think and write in many genres for many

purposes. (Atwell, 1989; Calkins, 1994; Fletcher, 1993; Graves, 1983, 1994). TCRWP's *Units of Study* provides for extended daily practice of writing. During this time, students work independently on their writing, putting into practice all that they are learning about how to

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stretch themselves as writers. Students also receive additional instruction during this time, either in one-on-one conferences or in small groups, to specifically tailor the teaching to the individual needs of each writer (Anderson, 2005; Calkins, 1994).

**Research Principle 5**

**A well-rounded curriculum provides supports for struggling writers and English language learners.**

In years past, one approach to supporting struggling writers was to slow down instruction, remove parts of the curriculum, or teach an alternate curriculum. Allington and Walmsey (1995) found that these practices resulted in compounding the delays; as the curriculum was slowed or less was taught, students fell even further behind.

As *Units of Study* is centered on teaching into the individual needs of student writers, each unit offers bends and turns to support the multiple needs of the many writers in each classroom, including strugglers. The curriculum suggests multiple ways to teach each skill as well as multiple ways to offer repetition if needed (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994; Wood Ray, 1999).

Teachers may opt to begin the year using the K-8 Continuum for Assessing Narrative Writing, which is available to all schools on the TCRWP web site at [readingandwritingproject.com](http://readingandwritingproject.com). This assessment tool helps teachers identify the particular strengths of a student writer and to place her on a scaled level of writing development. By looking ahead to the qualities of writing expected at the next level, teachers can make an individual learning plan for that student. Teachers can teach qualities of writing in whole-group lessons, small group lessons, or individual conferences. The teacher can tailor teaching to the specific, individual needs of all the students in the class. (Anderson, 2000; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994).

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**Research Principle 6**  
**Writing and reading  
are joined processes,  
and students learn best  
when writing and  
reading instruction are  
coordinated.**

Throughout most of the units in *Units of Study*, the reading and writing work is directly correlated. Ongoing, built-in book study provides exemplary texts on which students model their own writing. In reading, students learn to make meaning from published authors' writing; in writing, students learn to write so as to convey meaning to their readers. For example, if students are learning in reading to stop after dialogue and notice what that dialogue reveals about the character who says it, then in writing students will learn to reveal their characters' traits by crafting dialogue that reveals those traits. In short, students learn to implement in their own writing the same things that they are learning to interpret in their reading.

Students also learn to mentor themselves by studying the writing of others. They look closely at the writing of published authors they admire in order to learn ways to develop meaning, to structure their piece, to find craft moves they can try in their own writing, and to study the ways other authors use conventions of written language that they, too, can try. (Anderson, 2000, 2005; Calkins, 1994; Murray, 1990).

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