

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT



Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar

September	Raising the Level of Personal Narrative
October	Realistic Fiction
November	Essay Study: Personal and Literary
December	Writing with Independence: Preparing for the Writing Tasks of the State Test (ELA Exam): The Extended Response Essays
January / February	Writing Fiction, Historic Fiction, Fantasy or Mystery (And Making Reading-Writing Connections)
March	Journalism
April	Content Area Writing/Writing About Knowledge
May	Memoir
June	Revision

This curricular calendar suggests one possible way of imagining the writing curriculum for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade classrooms across a school. You will see that we suggest month-long units of study, and that the design of this suggested curriculum places a premium on supporting young writers' growing abilities to write narrative and expository (or persuasive) pieces. Informational and procedural writing, which are best taught within the content areas of social studies and science, are given less emphasis here because this calendar's focus is on a yearlong curriculum for the *writing* workshop, but we hope these kinds of writing are being supported across the curriculum.

This curriculum was fashioned with input from hundreds of teachers, coaches, and principals, and it stands especially on the shoulders of Calkins' *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades* (Heinemann, 2006), a series of books that convey the minilessons that Calkins and co-authors gave while teaching many of these units of study. The published series also shows the conferring, mid-workshop interruptions and teaching shares that filled Calkins' and co-authors' teachings.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

This curricular calendar takes into account the New York State ELA exam, and the state's standards; if you teach in a different state, you will need to adjust this sequence of work according to your state's assessments.

This yearlong course of study is part of a K-8 spiraling curriculum in which students receive instruction in narrative, expository, informational, poetic and procedural writing across their school experience. This instruction enables students to work in each of these fundamental modes with increasing sophistication, and decreasing reliance on scaffolds. For example, first graders write 'small moment stories' by recalling an event and retelling it "across their fingers," whereas third graders do similar work at a more advanced level when they make and revise timelines asking, "What is the heart of my story?," and elongate that section of the story. Middle school students, however, may plot narratives against the graphic organizer of a "story mountain," with the goal of including two small-moments (or scenes), and they revise the pieces so that beginnings and ends relate to what the story is *really* about. Stories by middle school students expand more globally, making statements about what matters in the world. In a similar manner, from kindergarten through eighth grade, students become progressively more capable of writing denser expository texts.

While the suggested curriculum varies according to grade level, supporting increasing sophistication and independence, it is also true that the essential skills of great writers remain consistent whether the writer is seven years old, seventeen, . . . or seventy for that matter. All of us try again and again to write with focus, detail, grace, structure, clarity, insight, honesty, and increasing control of conventions, and all of us do so by rehearsing, planning, studying exemplar texts, drafting, rereading, revising, re-imagining, and editing.

There is nothing haphazard in this sequence of units of study for writing. Still, there are many other ways that teachers *could* plan their writing curriculum. We lay out this course of study for a few reasons. First, we believe it is a wise trajectory; one that stands on the shoulders of the work these students have done in the preceding years, and one that prepares them for later work. Because this journey of study was fashioned with lots of input and lots of thought, and because it develops essential skills that young writers need, we believe it is worth careful consideration. Another reason we lay out this single line of work is that the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project's conference days and coaching courses cannot provide close support for hundreds of different iterations of a writing curriculum. Therefore, we want to alert you that during the year ahead, the Project's writing-related conference days for middle school teachers will prepare for and support this line of work. Conference days will generally precede a unit of study by at least a week. The study groups that we lead for coaches and principals will also support this trajectory of work.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

On the other hand, nothing matters more in your teaching than your own personal investment in it. Modify this plan as you see fit so that you feel a sense of ownership over your teaching. We do encourage you, however, to work in sync with colleagues from your grade level so that your teaching can benefit from the group's cumulative knowledge. Ideally, this will mean that your grade-level meetings can be useful occasions for swapping minilessons, lesson planning in ways that inform your teaching, assessing students' work, and planning ways to respond to their needs.

Assessment

Who was it who said, "We inspect what we respect." It will be important for you to assess your students' growth in writing using a number of different lenses to notice what students can do. As part of this, we encourage you to start the year off by giving students Donald Bear's spelling inventory, and we describe this in the section below on conventions of written language. We also recommend you use the assessment tool the TCRWP developed and piloted to track student growth in narrative writing. This tool continues to be a work-in-progress. The newest versions are available on the TCRWP website <http://rwproject.tc.columbia.edu>. We invite you and your colleagues to tweak and alter the instrument to fit your purposes. We especially recognize that it would be helpful to add more levels so that growth in writing can become more apparent, and you are invited to work with your colleagues to do so (and share what you create with our organization!). Whether you do this or not, the tool will help you hold yourself accountable to supporting growth in writing, and it especially clarifies the pathways along which developing writers travel as they become proficient in narrative writing. It can allow you to identify where a student is in a sequence of writing development, and to imagine realistic, do-able next steps for each student. This will make your conferring much more valuable, and your teaching clearer. What began as an *assessment* tool has become an extraordinarily important *teaching* tool!

That said, be aware that there are instances where we have seen the assessment tool make teaching *less* responsive to writers' intentions. If, when using the tool, you approach a student in the midst of writing and bypass listening and responding to that student, looking only at the draft itself, and use the narrative continuum as your only resource to help the writer do more, then the continuum will have made your teaching worse, not better. Conferring always needs to begin with a teacher pulling alongside a writer and asking, "What are you working on as a writer?" and "What are you trying to do?" and "What are you planning to do next?" Always, the teacher needs to help the writer reach towards his or her intentions. When we draw on all we know, not only about good writing, but also about how narrative or non-narrative writers tend to develop, the assessment tool can be a resource.

In '08-'09, we encourage all teachers across a school to agree and plan to use a version of the TCRWP narrative continuum as a shared school-wide method for tracking student growth in writing. If you can do so, we encourage you to devise a similar plan for following student progress in informational/essay writing, if you do develop such a tool

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

we hope you'll share it with the larger community. But frankly, if it's all you can do for now, it will be very worthwhile to simply assess students' development in narrative writing.

It is absolutely crucial that your first assessments occur at the very start of your year. Your students come to you with competencies and histories as writers. You cannot teach well unless you take the time to learn what they already know and can do. Then, too, if you capture and compare the data representing what students can do at the very start of the year with what emerges after a few months working with you, you will be in a good position to show parents and others all the ways in which students have grown as writers over the course of the year. In autumn parent-teacher conferences, you'll want to bring the writing a student did on the first day of school and contrast it with the writing the student did just before the conference. To do this, of course, it is crucial that you capture the 'Before' picture for comparison to the 'After'.

At the beginning of the year, we recommend that you devote one full day's writing workshop—specifically fifty minutes—to a writing-on-demand assessment of narrative writing. We cannot stress enough that you cannot scaffold kids' work during this assessment. Do *not* reteach students the qualities of good narrative writing, do *not* share examples of powerful texts, and definitely do *not* confer with writers. This needs to be a hands-off assessment. Say to your students, "I'm dying to get to know you as writers. Would you take today's writing workshop—you can have a full fifty minutes if you want—and write a focused personal narrative, a small-moment true story or anecdote, which shows what you know about writing personal narratives or anecdotes? Write about one time when you did something particular, something you remember well." Repeat those exact instructions more than once, and copy them down so you use the same instructions later in the year when you ask students to do the same thing. Say, "Usually, I will confer with you and you will confer with each other, but for today, I want to learn what you can do when you are on your own as a writer. So just do your best—remember that you will be writing a focused personal narrative, a small-moment true story, a piece which shows what you know about writing."

Some schools may decide to give students a second day to revise and edit, and as long as that is a school-wide, district-wide decision, it might be a reasonable option. However we advise against this, and suggest you will want to repeat this on-demand assessment several times across the year and so recommend that you ask for the work to be done in a single day. It is true that you could argue that no one-day of writing can possibly show how students revise, but the rough drafts and revisions that students do in a single sitting en route to their published pieces will demonstrate this skill far better than a two-day on-demand piece of writing—and one can learn a lot from one day's writing. The overarching reason for confining this to one day, though, is that it will be easier for you to repeat this on-demand assessment periodically if it is not time consuming. Also, on NY State tests your students will have fifty minutes to draft and revise.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

In last year's curricular calendar, we worried that saying, "Welcome to a new year. I want to begin by evaluating you," might seem harsh, and we suggested that you could soften this by saying that you couldn't possibly wait until the end of September to have some of your students' writing displayed on bulletin boards. We suggested that you tell students that they won't have a chance to work long on the piece because you are so eager to have their stories up in the room, and this was why they needed to plan, draft, revise, and edit in just one day. The problem with that advice was that a number of teachers could not resist assisting students' writing if that writing was going to be displayed! If you feel this way, then tell students this writing is just for you to get to know them, and then store it in their portfolios. But if you feel comfortable displaying their first draft writing, it's a nice idea to create a purpose for this initial assessment piece.

In any case, you will want to study what your students do when asked to write focused narratives—this will help you establish a base-line understanding of what your students know about the qualities of good narrative writing. You'll find that the narrative scale we give you has been designed with the TCRWP's instruction in mind, and you may discover that some of your students' pieces don't fall anywhere on the scale. This often happens when students are fairly adept writers but have never been taught to focus their narratives.

When you look over students' work, take note of whether they have been taught and are using rudimentary concepts. Look, for example, for evidence that students are writing *focused* narratives. You will want to see if they are writing structured pieces (for now this will usually mean chronological). Can these pieces be described as stories? That is, does the main character (the writer, in this instance) proceed through a plot-line of actions and reactions? Are students *storytelling* rather than summarizing and commenting on events? Are they using dialogue and details? Writing with end punctuation? Developing their characters? Angling the story to highlight their focal point? Do they seem to care not only about *what* they write, but also about *how* they write it?

You will assess your students' narrative writing through a second on-demand piece at the end of October (or whenever you complete this fall's work with narrative writing). You'll want to assess again in late February after your work with fiction. You should see that even within just two months, your students will have developed in fairly dramatic ways, but you need not wait until you assess to see evidence of growth. Any entry that a student writes within the narrative units of study can give you a helpful window into a student's progress.

Spelling, Mechanics, and Conventions in the Writing Curricular Calendar

We recommend that every teacher take fifteen minutes at the start of the year, and periodically throughout the year, to assess students' growing control of spelling and language features. We recommend you do so by giving your whole class what amounts to a spelling inventory, asking them to spell each of twenty-five words. Please use the spelling inventory devised by Donald Bears and available both on the TCRWP website.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

After giving the students the spelling inventory, you will need to count not the *words* correct but the *features* correct—this can take a few minutes for each student, but the result will be that you can channel your whole-class spelling and vocabulary instruction so that your teaching is aligned to the main needs that you see across most of your class, and it will also help you differentiate that instruction for your struggling and strongest spellers. Those of you who study with the TCRWP can expect conference days to support this important work.

Meanwhile, you will also want to understand which conventions of written language your students use with automaticity when they write, and the easiest way to do this is to look at the on-demand piece of writing. For middle school students, ask yourself:

- Which students do and do not generally control end punctuation and lower/upper-case letters?
- Which students do and do not tend to write in paragraphs?
- Which students do and do not include direct dialogue, and use quotation marks and other punctuation associated with dialogue?
- Which students do and do not generally control their verb tenses?
- Which students do and do not generally control subject-verb agreement so that the subjects and verbs are either plural or singular?

If you have students who do not use end punctuation in a roughly correct manner, who do not write in paragraphs, who seem to sprinkle upper case letters randomly throughout their writing, and/or who don't yet use quotation marks to set off direct dialogue, then you will want to embed instruction in all these things into your first two units of study. Hopefully, many more of your students will be doing all of this (not perfectly but as a matter of course) by the time of your second on-demand writing assessment at the end of October. You'll first teach any of these skills by embedding them into revision and editing work (even if the editing is just with an entry), and then you'll expect the instruction to affect students as they new draft entries too. For example, if students are not writing with end punctuation, teach them first to read over a piece of finished writing to insert punctuation wherever they've ended a thought or action—this will eliminate a lot of run-on sentences quickly, and with a minimum of fuss. Then you can teach students to write by having a complete thought, saying that thought to themselves and then writing without pausing until they reach the end of that thought, whereupon they leave a period on the page. Most students speak in sentences; they can write them, too.

If your students do all these things and are using but confusing tenses and subject-verb agreement, you'll teach this more advanced work, and expect students' command of it to progress more slowly. In either case, you will also want to be sure that your students are not boxed into simple sentence structures when they write. You may have students whose sentences all seem to go like this: *A subject did something* (perhaps to *someone*, with *something*). 'I went to the park. I rode my bike. I got an ice cream. I came home.' These students may feel, in their bones, that the writing lacks something and they may try to solve the problem by linking the simple sentences with conjunctions, but that won't

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

necessarily solve the problem (for example, ‘I went to the park and I rode my bike and I got an ice cream...’). Teach these students that it helps to tell when, how, under what conditions, or with what thoughts in mind, the subject did something. Then, sentences might now look like this: ‘One sunny Saturday morning I went to the park because I wanted to have some fun, I rode my bike. After that, I got an ice cream. Then I came home.’ It can also help to tell *how* one did *something*, and to tell about the receiver of the activity. ‘I went to the park, the one down the road from me. I rode my bike quickly, round and round in circles. I got an ice cream, a double scoop of chocolate that melted all over me.’

For those of you wanting to understand syntactical complexity more, you may find it interesting to measure your students’ syntactic maturity in writing by looking at the average length (the number of words) in the grammatical sentences that your students construct. Hunt calls these the “T-units” (Hunt, 1965). For instance, if a student writes: ‘*I went to the store. I bought some candy. I met Lisa,*’ these are three independent T-units (or simple sentences) and each one is short, with just a few words. This is simple syntax. This would still be written in T-units of 4 or 5 words if the sentences were linked with the word ‘and’ because a T-unit is the term for a *possible* sentence, whether or not the writer punctuates it as such. On the other hand, the number of T-units would double if the sentence went like this: ‘*When I went to the store, I bought some candy before I met Lisa.*’ Nowhere in that sentence is there a place where a period could have been added, so this is all one T-unit comprised of 14 words. More complex syntax has more words within a T-unit. For example, the same sentence could contain yet more words per T-unit (and still be more complex): *Yesterday I went to the store, where I bought some candy and met Lisa, who was glad to see me.* Some writers who struggle with punctuation show some complicated syntax. It is important for teachers to realize that correctness is not the only goal. A writer’s growing ability to write complex sentences (with many words per T-unit) should also be celebrated. Writers with complex syntax will create some error. These writers are still far more advanced than those who may use correct punctuation but rely only on simple sentences. For upper grades, the average length of a T-unit is 8 words. Be pleased if your students are writing with many sentences that contain this many or more T-units.

Usually you will first teach mechanics during revision and editing, after students have drafted and revised a piece and are preparing it for publication. But once you have taught a skill during editing—say, the skill of dividing a piece into paragraphs—then you need to hold students accountable for using that skill as they draft (perhaps not perfectly, but at least attempting to use it). For example, during the editing portion of unit one, you will probably need to teach all students to write in paragraph structure, teaching them some of the cues for narrative paragraphs such as when a new character enters, the time changes, or the setting changes. So then at the start of unit two, when students are collecting entries in their notebooks, you will want to act dumbfounded if you notice one student hasn’t remembered that now he is the sort of writer who writes using paragraph indentations. Make a big fuss over this as a way to teach students that whatever they learn

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

first during editing needs to become part of their ongoing repertoire, something they rely on all the time.

Paragraphing and the punctuation involved in dialogue will fit naturally into narrative units of study. Writers who include lots of description will be more ready for clauses set off by commas. That is, students benefit most from instruction when it helps them to be more powerful as they work on projects they care about, rather than studying mechanics in isolation.

One *crucial* point is that students will move through stages of using and confusing new constructs before they master them. This means that getting things slightly wrong can be a sign of growth. If we only ‘fix’ students’ writing, or tell them to be ‘correct,’ then they may revert to simpler vocabulary and sentence structure that they are sure they know how to punctuate. For instance, when students first start moving into past tense, they may not know all the forms of irregular verbs and they may confuse some. If we emphasize only accuracy, they will revert to present tense, or to safe verbs they know. In the same way, they may not dare write longer sentences if they’re not sure how to punctuate them. Common stages of development include *unfamiliarity, familiarity and experimentation, using and confusing, mastery and control* (Bear, 2008).

In the third unit, teach students to recall these conventions as they turn to non-narrative writing. You may want to re-teach ending punctuation, showing how it affects the tone of non-narrative writing. You will want to re-teach paragraph structure in non-narrative writing. Some of this can be small group instruction. Always teach students to use all the conventions they have learned till now to be effective editors of their own and others’ writing, and to write drafts that are more accurate in terms of conventions. This also prepares them for the ELA exam.

After the exam, as students return to writing stories, this might be a good time for them to write and punctuate more complicated sentences, doing so in an effort to cue readers into how to read their writing with lots of mood and expressiveness. They will benefit if they have opportunities to pay attention to punctuation in reading, read-aloud, and shared reading. This fluency work, done in the guise of pursuing prosody, can help readers make the text mean more because of the way it is read. If needed, you will want to form small groups around any convention that merits more attention. For example, in a small group you can help students who get confused distinguishing singular and plural pronouns, or between apostrophes for possessives and contractions.

Changes from Last Year to This Year

You will see at a glance that we decided that because your students worked through as many as three personal narratives last year, writing personal narratives, raising the level of them, and then embedding those with more meaning during the memoir unit, we have made the initial narrative unit more ambitious than ever, and we have suggested that your students be given the opportunity to write fiction in October. We’ve also added a unit on

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

writing historic fiction, fantasy, or mystery in February, and we hope that students are in matching genre-based reading clubs, allowing this second fiction unit to capitalize on reading-writing connections. You will see, too, that we have deepened our emphasis on essays and content-area writing, doing so in ways that still support student choice.

As you look through this year's curricular calendar you will notice that among the many changes we have taken out the poetry unit. We have decided instead to weave poetry throughout the year; starting in September and continuing through June you will immerse students in the genre. We think poems can be inserted into minilessons on almost any topic, as some poems are narratives, some are miniature persuasive essays, and as readers and writers of poetry need to do all the work that readers and writers of any other text do. Each month you will expose students to a few wonderful poems, using these to teach the craft moves that are emphasized in that unit of study. Students may write poems within Unit 7, Content Writing.

Remember that we present this calendar as one optional and recommended progression. We are aware that you and your colleagues may well make choices that are different than those we present here, and we welcome those choices. A year from now, we'd love to hear your suggestions for variations on this theme! If you devise a new unit of study that you are willing to share with other teachers, please send it to Lucy Calkins at: rwproject@tc.columbia.edu.

Unit One – Raising the Level of Personal Narrative

September

As we start our first unit of writing it is important to hold onto two ideas at once: that our adolescent writers have most likely written many personal narratives before this one, and that they will still most likely need much support in becoming even more independent in their small moment writing. This requires that we find ways to both push our students' to increased automaticity in their writing of personal narratives while we try to create a unit that feels fresh for adolescents and allows for the numerous supports and reviews that our young writers will need to be successful.

Before you launch into any of the teaching described in this write-up, be sure you collect samples of what your students can do using the on-demand writing assessment described earlier. This will allow you to tweak your plans. For example, if your students' narratives cluster around level five on the continuum, then look at the difference between levels five and six and plan for instruction that will help as many students as possible make that step in short order!

September is always a challenging month because we inevitably work towards two rather different goals: We want to establish well-managed, productive classrooms *and* we want to rally students to work with enthusiasm on projects of great importance. This year, you'll launch the writing work with a single unit on personal narrative before moving into

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

a unit on fiction in October. You may feel tempted to jump immediately into fiction, bypassing the narrative work, but we *strongly* caution against that. First of all, personal narrative writing is an especially crucial genre because every other kind of writing relies upon students being skilled at writing focused narratives. Secondly, if you do not reinforce the importance of storytelling over summarizing now, before the lure of plot pressures students towards writing long, rambling summaries, your chances of helping students write effective fiction are not good. The real goal of this unit, then, is not only to improve the quality of *narrative* writing but also to improve the quality of writing—and of *writers*—in general.

Don't linger for a moment before getting your students going. Remind them that each day they'll each choose a strategy for generating writing, and they'll each write an entry or two that reflects all they already know about writing zoomed in, focused narratives. Be sure, too, that they carry their notebooks and write more entries at home. Expect the entries they write on the first day compared to the ones they write on, say, day five will already reflect dramatic improvements as you quickly rope students back into doing all that they learned during previous years but may have forgot over the summer.

Establish Writing Processes and Habits That Support Stamina in Writing

As you approach this first unit of study, think about the writing processes and work habits that your particular class of students established in the preceding year, and about ways in which you can ratchet up expectations so students approach their writing with new rigor and independence. For example, consider the way in which they used their writers' notebooks during the preceding year. By now, students should see these as indispensable tools for living writerly lives and as workbenches for experimenting with different strategies. You may want to begin the year keeping your own writer's notebook alongside your students. Dedicate yourself and the class to the prospect of keeping notebooks in more writerly ways, using these tools just as professional writers do. The single most important way to do this will be to model your own commitment to a writer's notebook.

Certainly by the time students are in sixth grade, the writers' notebooks need to travel between home and school, and students should be writing entries in them every night and every day. Using evenings as well as school-time for gathering entries doubles the volume of writing that students do in their notebooks—a worthy goal, especially this year as you only have one month to revive and extend your students' skills at writing personal narratives. Some teachers find that in the transition to middle school students have difficulty managing their materials for their many classes. You will then want to focus on spending time at the start of the year reinforcing the organizational work of being a student, which may include small group trouble shooting lessons and even whole class reminder minilessons from time to time.

Note that the homework assignments you give to your students do matter. If you invest in homework, then your students will as well, and, again, you can double the time your students spend on writing. We recommend you and your colleagues watch the DVD that

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

comes with the *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3-5* (Heinemann, 2006). There are hundreds of carefully designed homework assignments aligned to this curricular calendar. Each can be personalized by you for your particular students. Thoughtful, well-designed homework assignments double as a way of communicating with parents, so they'll provide you with extra dividends.

During this first unit of study, one of your main goals will be to teach students to write with volume and stamina. By sixth grade students should be able to produce one to two pages of writing every day in school and an equal amount of writing at home. This means that your students will be writing *at least* ten to fifteen pages a week in their writers' notebooks. You will see that most students in your class can be held to these standards for production, and that some students need small-group instruction and lots of praise geared towards helping them write more quickly (for example, a star for half of a page, encouragement to keep going).

Before You Start, Anticipate the Trajectory of Your Students' Work Across the Whole Unit

Before you launch any unit, you will want to have in mind what the work is that you expect your students to produce across the unit. Last year, we recommended that your sixth graders produce two personal narratives during this first unit of study, and a third during the next. We did not feel that enough of your sixth graders were entering your grade with skills enough to successfully persevere on one narrative for the entire month of September. It was more important, we felt, to teach students to write a lot, work productively, and produce a lot, and we felt the best way to do this was to shepherd them through two cycles of narrative writing within a single month. You will see that this time, we recommend you help students write just one effective personal narrative during this month and that you plan, from the start, that they will revise that narrative in very significant ways, including writing a very new second draft. However, if your students are especially unaccustomed to writing, and especially fearful of each other and of the page, you will probably find that the first piece of writing they draft is so wooden that it may not seem like a good investment to lead students to work an entire month on it. You may decide, therefore, to channel them to do only minor revising of that writing before you get them started on a second piece, one that they bring to completion. If you decide to follow this alternate plan for your teaching, rely on our description of September in the third grade curricular calendar. The decision to do so will not affect your students' eagerness, or their readiness, to write fiction in October.

Assuming you have decided to help students draft and revise one narrative piece across the first month of school, you should plan that during the first week of school the students will gather at least one entry a day in school, and one entry a day at home, and most of those entries will probably be at least a page in length, hopefully longer.

Before beginning the unit, you'll want to have in mind not only the number of pieces that your students will probably write, but also the likely progression of the work. Anticipate that by the end of the sixth or fifth day of writing your students will be ready to reread all

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

their entries (presumably during a share session), and to select one which will function as the seed idea for the narrative they will eventually publish. Then they'll spend two days (and devote at least two pages of their notebook) rehearsing for the draft they'll write outside the notebook. As part of this rehearsal, they will storytell to each other multiple times, each time working towards new goals. They will also draft and revise timelines or story mountains, leads and other plans for their stories, mulling over the meaning they want to highlight in the story, and they'll read at least one exemplar text. Then, by the middle of the second week, they'll devote one intense day to producing Draft One of that first story. These drafts will be written outside the notebook.

You will then want to teach students to revise, and your goal will be to recruit them to reread, rethink, re-imagine, and to realize their writing could have been altogether better. Then, hopefully, your students will be willing to try entirely new second drafts. They'll need to rehearse for the second drafts just as they rehearsed for the first drafts. Your main goal will be to make sure that by the time writers write this second draft, they will each envision his or her story so the writer can write the unfolding drama, rather than relying on summary. You will also hope that the writers have decided what meaning they want to put forward, and will deliberately write in ways that allow them to forward those intended meanings. After the second draft is written (and again we suggest this be written in one fast and furious day of writing), teach writers ways to revise. This time the revisions will lead to flaps holding new leads or endings, to inserted sections, to parts being rewritten, and so forth. That is, the next round of revisions will probably be piecemeal for most students. A study of a mentor text can inform this work. Eventually students will turn to editing, working on punctuation, paragraphing, spelling and the like.

As students learn about narrative writing, some of the lessons will be *explicit*, taught in minilessons and conferences. But some of the lessons will be *implicit*, gleaned as students study texts that sound like those you hope they will soon write. Even just one dearly loved and closely studied text can infuse a writing workshop with new energy. You will want to read a few focused narratives aloud, and to pull your students close to study one or two with tremendous detail. Invite students to study selected pages from *Bad Boy*, by Walter Dean Myers, "Mr. Entwistle" from Jean Little's *Hey World, Here I Am!*; "Shortcut," by Crews, "Carrots," by Adam Bagdasarian in *First French Kiss*, or "The End of Summer," by Kimberly Gorall. You can also draw on James Howe's Collections of Short Stories such as *13: Stories That Capture the Agony and Ecstasy of being Thirteen*, or *The Color of Absence: 12 Stories About Loss and Hope*, and mine these texts for small moment writing.

Launch Your Students' Writing By Recruiting Their Ideas For This Year's Workshop and By Collecting What They Know About Narrative Writing

It is impossible to over-emphasize the importance of inspiration. As a teacher, think about a time when your work felt really good to you. Sift through all your teaching memories until you arrive at one such time. Now ask yourself, "What made that particular time in your teaching life so good?" My hunch is that it was powerful not because you

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

could arrive late, leave early, no stress, no pressure, no expectations. No, my hunch is that the time when your work felt good was a time when you believed your input mattered, when you felt called upon to give and give and give some more, and you were willing to do so because you believed your work was adding up to something, because you could tell you were effecting others, because you felt appreciated.

In this world where everyone is overly focused on accountability, on weighing and measuring and checking to make sure no one is stinting on any job, it is easy to lose track of our own beliefs about what people need in order to do good work. Your students are not all that different than you! Like you, they need to know that their ideas matter, that their voices count. They need to feel they are doing work that matters terribly to them. They will work harder if you inspire than if you micro-control and punish.

You will need to decide how you can launch the year in ways that tap students' energies as writers. There is no single answer for how to do this. And we could write up a lot of suggestions that could work or not work, depending on how they are done. The important thing is that you keep in mind that your students are not all that different than you and I, and that we treat each other in ways that we hope we'll be treated.

Many teachers have found that one of the ways to recruit students' investment in the writing workshop is to invite them to co-author plans for this year. If you ask students to reflect on times when writing has been good for them and times when it has not been good, chances are good that you will end up having an honest and heartfelt talk that could set the stage for the year. You can invite students to reflect on their lives as writers if you tell a story about one time in your own writing life. Remember, if you want students to bring their self doubts and vulnerabilities to the community, it helps if *you* tell about one time in your life. Take a small moment when writing was hard for you, and tell that story using your narrative writing skills to intensify it one. Students will be more apt to respond with their stories.

You may ask students to think and jot quickly about a time in their lives when writing was a particularly good thing or a particularly hard thing, and then to have them talk in partnerships, or tables (two sets of partners), or as a whole class community, about what they found. The goal, of course, is to move beyond this to thinking, "How can we make this into the best possible year for us as writers? How can we support each other as writers?" In similar ways, you could lead students to jot, talk, and share about what it is that need from a writing partner. As you do this, bring students in on the fact that they are helping you plan how writing will go in your classroom. For example, even if, in fact, you'd already planned to provide time for partnership conversations, you could announce, "Are you saying it really helped you to talk about your writing with a partner? That's giving me the idea that we should have writing partners this year" You might, in similar ways, invite them to think with you about the plans for curricular units in the fall. If you don't mind telling a bit of a tall tale to them, you could go so far as to say, "I was thinking about having two units for personal narrative writing in the fall, then writing

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

fiction in February. Does that make sense to you all, or might you have a different suggestion?" You can pretty much count on students advocating for fiction to be earlier in the year, and if you let students think the decision was made with their input (it actually was, just it was made a bit ahead of time) they'll be please. In any case, in one way or another, you will want to invite your students to join together to think about the question, "What kind of a writing community do we want to form together?"

We also think it is absolutely important that *you* live in the classroom as a passionate writer, as a person who cannot imagine living without a writer's notebook at your side. You will need to bring your own notebook into the class, to talk about how the notebook threaded through your life over the summer, and to tell students ways in which the fact that you write makes you into a more aware, wide-awake, reflective person. We hate to say this, but assume the role of being an avid writer even if this is a bit of a stretch. You can tell your students that you used to be all those things that really, deep down you may still be (afraid, bruised from the bad instruction you may have received etc.). But try to be the sort of leader who tells a story that goes like this: "I once wasbut now I...."

If you cannot comfortably assume the role of writing mentor in your class, then it will be all the more crucial that you read aloud texts written by other authors and tell stories of the author's writing life and identify. Perhaps the easiest writer to use for this purpose will be Ralph Fletcher. Many of your students will have read at least one of his novels, and now you can share excerpts from his memoir, *Marshfield Dreams*, and then bring in stories from one of his books on writing well--say, *A Writer's Notebook*. You can also simply read aloud texts that talk about writing and the writing life. We recommend, for example, *Seeing the Blue Between: Advice and Inspiration for Young Poets* by Paul B. Janeczko, excerpts from *Speaking of Journals*, edited by Paula Graham, and poems by William Stafford, Mary Oliver, Billy Collins and others. Remember, this year you will want poetry to be a thread that weaves through your entire year. Poems can provide intense lessons in the writerly life!

Strategies for Generating Narrative Writing

Remind students that they already have a repertoire of strategies that they can use to come up with ideas for personal narrative stories. Tell students that this year, you will teach them how to use those familiar strategies *really well*, like professional writers do. On your first or second day of the workshop, you can ask your students to share strategies they already know and then you can compile them on a chart, *Strategies for Generating Narrative Writing*. Please *do not* dust off a chart you used during previous years and re-use it—students should see their own ideas and words (and yours as well) going onto chart paper, and feel like those charts capture the contours of their lived experience in a classroom.

Your job will be to lift the level of the work that your students do with those strategies, rather than simply teaching them yet more strategies. For example, be aware that when you ask students to report on strategies for generating writing, they will be apt to produce

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

‘topics’ not strategies. A strategy, by definition, involves a step-by-step procedure. So the items on your chart can’t be single words (People, Places, etc.) but instead need to be procedures. These will be written in phrases, separated by commas, as in this example: ‘Jot down a person you care about, brainstorm several times you recall, select one of these, make a movie in your mind of that time, storytell on the page.’

Although your students will probably already know that writers sometimes think of a person, place or thing that matters, then list several small moments we’ve experienced with that person place or thing, and choose one of these to write as a story, they may not realize that writers take no more than five minutes to *quickly* jot down a person, place or thing that matters, to list a few small moments we’ve spent with that person, place or thing, and then to select one of these moments and begin writing the “long” story of it down the page. This process of brainstorming does not encompass one day’s writing workshop!

Teach students that when they list small moments that they have spent with a person, each moment is best described in a sentence (or a long phrase), and not in a single word. If a student writes “Marissa” and under that name writes “dance,” that student is not set up to produce a focused narrative. But if under the name “Marissa,” the student writes, “the time Marissa said yes when I asked her to dance,” then the student is off to a good start towards writing a narrative. You can also teach students that writers do not record every thought that crosses our minds, we instead weigh ideas and record only those we think are promising. And we select moments that are gripping to us, that make us feel something intensely, because we know the truth of the saying, ‘No tears for the writer, no tears for the reader.’

It is also important to teach students that in a single day of writing the student will not produce just one entry. The student uses a strategy to generate an idea for writing, writes the entry, and then, fairly often, has time to return to the original brainstorming list and select a second idea, writing another entry.

Because your students will have already participated in writing workshops, and will already bring with them a repertoire of strategies for generating writing, from the start you will want to teach students that writers carry with them a cumulative repertoire of strategies (a tool box of sorts), drawing on these tools as needed. For example, you might say, “You already have a whole repertoire of strategies for generating narrative writing,” and then send students off to write, using any of the strategies on the list, or any other strategy that might work for that particular writer. By referring to all that students already know and inviting them to draw upon that full repertoire, you can emphasize that learning to write is *cumulative* and that any new work that writers do will *always* stand on the shoulders of previous work.

Chances are good you will also want to pass along a couple of new strategies that your students may not seem to know and use. You will probably select strategies that you

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

believe will channel students towards writing pieces that will be especially significant to them. One way to write a powerful personal narrative, for example, is to think about the first (or the last) time we did something. Then, too, if a writer thinks about a time he or she learned something, this is apt to produce a shapely and powerful story. Writers sometimes think about a strong emotion, a feeling that we have a lot of, and think, “When, specifically, did I feel that emotion (hope or worry or sadness or pressure).” We sometimes generate ideas for writing by thinking about major issues in our lives, such as bullying, family pressure, fitting in at school. Then we think of specific times when we struggled with that issue. We can also think about the social issues that we have encountered and begin to capture moments where our gender, race or class influenced our lives in complicated ways. As you teach *strategies* for generating writing, you will share little bits of the stories those strategies led you to write, and in this way, while teaching strategies for generating writing, you will also teach students to write with focus and detail. Specifically, you will show that stories of significance can be found in the smallest and most ordinary occasions.

Remember, however, that at the same time you do not want to overload students with too many strategies. Any one strategy can be used over and over and over so students do not need many. Remember, too, that in just one day you can lay out several possible strategies for generating writing. You could, for example, demonstrate one in the minilesson, another in your mid-workshop teaching point, and still another in your share.

Although you may teach one particular strategy on a given day, when students go off to write, some will draw on strategies listed during previous days, and some will not need any particular strategy because they’ll have been living like writers, coming to the desk ready to write. Still others will be continuing on an entry started on an earlier day. Take a count one day. How many of the kids are using the strategy you taught that day? Hopefully less than half! If most of your class routinely does only whatever you talk about in that day’s minilesson, you’ll want to lend your full weight toward reminding writers to draw on their full repertoire of strategies. And you will want to check that you are not inadvertently conveying this message in your minilesson: “Wait until I can get you started on today’s piece of writing.” It is crucial that students can use and reuse their small repertoire of strategies, and do so with independence.

Then, too, it is important that students begin to rely less and less on strategies for generating writing, coming to regard life itself as one big source of stories! As soon as your students are living like writers, they’ll find that true stories come to mind without reliance on a particular strategy at all. Everything and anything that a person sees and does and thinks and feels can remind us of the stories we have to tell.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Lift the Level of the Entries Your Students Collect: Revising Your Students' Knowledge of Narrative Writing Even Before They Write Draft One

Remember that you never need to devote more than two days at the start of a unit to the challenge of equipping writers with strategies for generating writing. In no time, students will have plenty of strategies to draw from and then you will want to teach in ways that lift the level of the entries they write. Look at their entries, and think back to all they learned the previous year. More than likely, students will have been taught to write about focused events, to start with dialogue or a small action, and above all, to storytell rather than merely comment on the event. But then, it is likely they will not be doing all of these things so you may need to re-teach the essentials of narrative writing. Depending on their previous writing experiences, some will need to be reminded that narratives are just that—stories. In a personal narrative, one character (presumably the writer) experiences one thing, then the next, then the next. Students may also need to be reminded that their narratives will be more effective if they zoom in on a small episode, telling the detailed chronology of that one twenty-minute (or so) episode. With reminders, they can write entries in which they retell not the entire visit to the Dominican Republic but instead they zoom in on the part when the whole family sat down to dinner for the first time. The main reason to “zoom in” is that this makes it more likely that the writer will relive an episode with enough detail that the reader, too, can experience the event.

There will never be a time when you do not need to remind students of the importance of making a movie in the mind in order to write a story. If a student talks “all about” an event, summarizing it with sentences such as, “It was a good dance. They played great music. I danced a lot. It was exciting,” then the student is *commenting on* the game rather than *telling the story* of it. This writer, then, will not yet have grasped the idea of writing in a storyteller’s voice. If, on the other hand, this piece begins, “My friends surrounded me, pumping me up. I walked across the crowded gym, wiping my sweaty hands on my jacket. Standing in front of Marissa, I managed to croak out, ‘You want to dance, or something?’”, then the student is writing a story. Most students need to be reminded to make movies in their mind and to write so readers can picture exactly what is happening.

Selecting a Seed Idea and Rehearsing for Writing

After students generate narrative entries for a week, you will want to teach them to reread these and to choose one entry to develop. Each writer can star the selected entry. Then you'll need to teach the writer some strategies for rehearsing for writing. As students become more experienced, they can do more and more rehearsal. Most sixth graders profit from being told that writers often take a few minutes to plan writing. I tell them, “If we're writing a nonfiction book, we plan by making outlines with main ideas and supportive evidence. But when we are writing narratives, the easiest way to plan a piece is to make alternate timelines.” Then we sketch out one sequence for how the story could proceed, thinking, “Maybe my story will go like this?” Then we re-imagine the story, and think, “Or maybe the story will go like this,” and we try a second timeline. The only reason to write timelines is so that we can revise them. Which dot on the timeline is not essential to the heart of the story? Which dot needs to be expanded (by slowing time

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

down) into a series of dots? Timelines are *only* useful if they are drafted and revised!

But the decisions over what to include and what to bypass, what to stress and what to skip, should ideally be made out of an effort to forward the writer's message. The

question, "How do I start my story?" really can't be answered, save in tandem with the question, "What is it I really want my reader to know and to feel?"

Therefore you probably will want to teach students that writers prepare for writing not only by making timelines, but also by asking, "What am I trying to show about myself through this story? What do I want readers to know about me? How can I bring that meaning out in this episode?" As part of this, students need to learn that the same story can be told differently, depending on the *theme* the writer wants to bring out. An episode about falling on the court during a basketball game could be written to show that the writer was afraid but conquered her fears, or it could be written from another perspective to show that peer pressure goaded the writer to take reckless risks. If this instruction in selecting and highlighting meaning seems way too complex for your sixth graders, your instincts are probably on target and then I'd suggest you follow the write-up for teaching narrative writing to third graders.

If your students are skilled at narrative writing, you may want to teach them that narratives need not stay within the confines of a single twenty minute episode. Narratives actually are often comprised of two scenes glued together with bits of exposition (or narration) between them. For students who are ready to learn this, then, you can point out a writer who has put together two (or even, perhaps, three) scenes (or small moments) one after another. For example, the writer who has written a small moment vignette about getting an X-Box for his birthday will construct a better story if he sets up the incident by first telling about an earlier time when he begged for the X-Box, then jumps to the moment he got his X-Box, and ends with a description of playing video games with friends. Similarly, the student who writes about defending the goal in a soccer game will construct a more effective story if she first backs up to re-create the moment when she put on her goalie pads and worried they might not be thick enough. This will help your students prepare for the upcoming unit on fiction writing.

Storytelling can be another way to rehearse for writing, and of course it is important to raise the level of students' storytelling. You may want to teach students to plan a story with a beginning, middle and end, and before they tell the story, to think, "What do I want my listener to feel?" You could also teach students that story-tellers stretch out the good parts, trying to be sure those parts really capture the listener.

Invite students to rehearse for writing also by drafting a bunch of different leads. You may want to remind students that writers often start a story with dialogue or with a small action or by conveying the setting. Again, the real purpose of this instruction is not just to produce a more dramatic lead; it is also meant to dislodge students from summarizing

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

events and move them toward making movies in their minds.

Writing a First Rough Draft

Once a writer has drafted and revised timelines that outline the sequence of the event, has written a few possible leads for the story and has told the story a handful of times, it's time to draft the story. Remind students to make a movie in the mind in order to write a story. A student who is successful at this will tell a story so that the reader can picture exactly what is happening. The story might sound like this: "The bass line of the song shook my feet. I was shaking too. From head to toe I trembled as I made my way across the room to the gorgeous girl in hot jeans leaning against the wall with her friends." We strongly suggest students write the whole draft, quickly, non-stop, in a single day's writing workshop. Our experience is that stories tend to be vastly more coherent and powerful when they are written quickly, under pressure and in one sitting. You will need to decide whether students write their drafts in story booklets or on regular notebook paper. The booklets may help your strugglers, but single sheets may be better for helping writers get lost in the rush of the story.

You may need to remind students that the magic of writing will not happen if writers bring their timelines out onto the desk and follow them doggedly. Instead, good writing results from an act of imagination. Each writer needs, above all, to make a movie in his or her mind, recounting exactly what happened for each dot and putting that whole story onto the page, bit by bit. For example, a writer who is telling the story of going on a roller coaster with her dad may have as the first dot on her timeline, 'I got into the roller coaster.' She may, however, start the story like this:

"I stepped into the roller coaster car, and looked back at Dad. He was ghost-white, and glancing around as if hoping someone would rescue him. I sat on the cold hard bench and felt my Dad collapse onto the seat next to me. Before I could get the safety bar all the way down he was asking the attendant if this thing would hold, and gripping the bar so tightly his knuckles were white."

By this time, the writer should feel as if she is reliving the event, and the goal for writing-time will be to let her pen fly, writing on and on and on in a manner which recaptures the truth of the experience. Tell students that they will have just one day to write the entire draft, and they are to keep their hands moving all day long as they relive the experience.

As you move among your students, look for students who are summarizing instead of struggling and if you can do so, intervene now and help them get started with an entirely new draft. Before they start the new draft, remind them again to make a movie in the mind in order to write a story. A writer who is successfully making a movie in his mind will tell a story so that the reader can picture exactly what is happening.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

What About Errors in Students' Entries?

During writing workshop in September it will be especially important to teach your kids to try their best *and move* on. Many of your students will know full well that they have misspelled a word and will be reluctant to move on from it. You might teach students to circle a word if they are unsure how it is spelled, and move on. Another strategy is to write it three different ways on a post-it or scrap paper and pick the one that seems closest – and move on! This is not the time of year to make a big deal out of spelling perfectly. It is the time of year to emphasize fluency, drafting quickly, and of course rereading to edit *as best you can*.

On the other hand, even now, early in the year, you'll want to remind students to spell correct the high frequency words that they almost know. You may have a word wall of words that your students use and confuse- encourage students to rely on the word wall if need be in order to spell those words correctly-and many of them are perfectly able to punctuate on the run as they write, they just aren't sure you value this. Convey, that independent writers do write with punctuation, even in a rough draft. We don't organize our punctuation in a draft but we use it with automaticity.

Be sure to load on the praise for students' best efforts to edit their spelling independently, even if they still have not quite got the exact spelling. Whatever you do, do not mark up the students' entries with corrections – if kids learn that despite their best efforts, and adults will find all the mistakes for them, this can hurt their sense of independence and their willingness to give editing their best try on their own. Before a student's draft is published, however, you'll want to help that writer spot and address errors.

Revising Drafts

The good thing about asking students to start and finish a single draft, all in one day, is that hopefully they will not be as wed to this draft as they would be if they'd eked it out, bit by bit, across a week of work. So even if they have not actually completed the draft, suggest that writers pause after a day of drafting, and have the courage to imagine that the draft could be written differently. Almost always, writers stride through too much terrain, walking with big steps. Almost always writers talk about rather than relive the event, and bypass a huge amount of the detail.

Tell students that you know that last year, many of them revised by inserting new sentences into a draft, by trying a new lead and sticking it onto the old draft. That was all well and good for when they were in fifth grade. But *this* year, they are older, and more than that, this year, they are on the brink of writing fiction. Hopefully, you'll be able to recruit them to at least try writing a whole new draft, turning the first one over on the desk so they do not simply recopy that draft.

Of course, it will be important that the new draft is actually new and improved. As part of that, show students how to read critically, imagining ways their draft could be otherwise. Immerse them in examples of beautifully written narratives so that you raise their

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

ambitions as writers, helping them to imagine that they could do more.

If you decide to rally students to look closely at the ways in which other writers have created texts that resemble those you hope your students will write, you will probably want first to invite them to simply read (or listen to) the texts, allowing those texts to affect them. Then, afterwards, they can pause and ask, “What has this writer done that

has affected me?” You will want to guide students to notice some of the most important features of the touchstone text.

Remind students to draw on all they already know about revision. Students will have learned the year before that writers reread and ask, “Where is the heart of my story?” and they stretch that part of the story out, writing it with more detail and enthusiasm. Students will also have learned that a writer can make a special point to not only tell the external but also the internal story what we noticed, remembered, thought. . . . Remind them that the strategies they learned last year need to be drawn upon again and again. That is—explicitly teach transference!

Revise Draft Two

Sometimes, you will see that students’ drafts are swamped with dialogue. Readers often can’t discern even who is speaking or what is happening. When you see this sort of writing, keep in mind that the student has probably made a movie in the mind, which is a great thing, and he or she simply hasn’t mastered this yet. The over-reliance on dialogue represents a step ahead, yet it poses problems that need to be addressed. Teach students that writers sometimes realize, after having written a draft, that our writing provides only a sound-track, and so we revise our writing to show the aspects of the story that we have left out. Teach these students to alternate between writing an action, a thought, and dialogue. This may seem mechanical (no writer thinks about writing in this way), but if writers aim for this variety for a few days, their writing will become stronger.

In addition, you may want to teach students that a writer’s revisions are always informed by our sense of how stories tend to go. This, then, could become your entree into teaching students that stories are not, in fact, chains of equally-developed micro-events (as illustrated by a timeline), but rather that stories include problems and solutions, and are characterized by rising action, increasing tension.

In the end, your students also need to ask, “What effect do I want to create in my text and how could I create it?” After all, the real goal is to improve the quality of the writing—and of the writers—in general. Your deeper lesson throughout the unit will be this: Writers never stop learning how to write better. It is not enough to learn that an author uses dialogue and then, *presto*, students add dialogue to their drafts, checking that item off as done. Writers are constantly engaged in the long-term continual study of good writing.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Ending the Unit

When you finish this unit, publish students' work. Many of you have realized that the bigger the publication, the bigger our adolescent writers' enthusiasm is for the next unit. Decide if, before progressing to the next unit, you want to devote another day to an on-demand writing assignment. If you do, give your students the very same directions which you gave at the start of the year, only this time let them know you want to see what they

have learned from the month of studying narrative writing. Then, once again, be sure to insist they work with independence.

After students have written their pieces, you'll want to see where each student now stands on the narrative continuum. Has the student progressed from the start of the year? Show each student what you see. Naming progress is a critical form of teaching. Look at the writing which is a notched or two beyond the work most of your students are producing, and notice on the assessment tool, specific characteristics of just-beyond-reach texts.

Unit Two – Realistic Fiction

October

The fiction unit has enormous power and potential. It is a favorite unit for teachers and students alike. The wonderful thing about this unit is that adolescents are dying to write fiction, to become someone other than themselves or to be even more of themselves. Their lunchroom experiences, walks from the subway, evenings with their parents, are chocked full of moments waiting to be told – fiction gives our students a chance to explore those moments and emotions more deeply and in some ways more safely. When we begin our fiction unit our students are ready to invest heart and soul in their writing, and eager to write more and work harder than before.

Although this energy is a wonderful resource, it poses challenges because students are no sooner out of the starting gate in the unit than they have stories that are longer than anything they have ever written. As wonderful as this is, it also poses problems. Conferences become cumbersome because the pieces are so long. Partnerships can become awkward because simply sharing the stories can take forever. All of these problems are compounded by the fact that more often than not, the students are in love with every single word of their stories!

Approaching This Unit with Clear Goals

It is crucial, then, that teachers approach the unit planning to rein students in from writing incredibly long stories by encouraging them to spend more time planning, and by giving them examples of the short-stories they imagine students writing. It is also important for teachers to approach the unit knowing that they will be insisting upon much more dramatic, large-scale, extensive revision than the students have experienced prior to now. This means, of course, that actually this is a unit on rehearsal and large-scale revision as well as on fiction.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Of course, the unit will be about not only rehearsal, revision and fiction. It will also advance other goals that seem especially important to you. Be sure you approach the unit with very clear intentions. While planning this second unit, then, you and your colleagues will want to look back at several sources of information about your students' habits and abilities as writers. Look at the writing they've just published in terms of the narrative continuum, and think about what it is your students can do and can almost do. If you look at the level of writing (on the narrative continuum) that most of your students have produced and look one notch ahead, this should help you imagine a pathway that could pay off for many of your writers.

Think also about what you believe your students have been trying to do as they write. What has 'good writing' meant to them, and how can you give them new horizons? If, for example, you discover that your students believe that "good writing" means that a writer does exactly what the teacher talked about in that day's minilesson and then the writer is "done," plan now for ways that the upcoming unit can allow you to channel writers to draw from their growing repertoire of strategies. Think now about how you will teach students the habit of making ongoing plans for the kinds of writing work that they will undertake each day. If it looks to you as though many of your students regard good writing as sequenced and full of details, and yet you actually think much of what they produce is a bit dull, plan ways in which to help them focus more on meaning during this unit, and make a point of showing them that the details they choose support the meaning they want to convey. Essentially, set goals at the start of the unit that will continue to build on their writing lives beyond it.

Collecting: Mining Our Lives for Story Ideas

It is important to note that the ideas in this write up draw closely on the book, *Writing Fiction*, from the series *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3-5* (Heinemann, 2006). Though the title says "Grades 3-5," Middle School teachers throughout the city and around the country have found the series to be incredibly helpful in imagining powerful writing workshops in their own classrooms. Teachers seeking help with minilessons, conferences and small group work will find it helpful to read the lessons that co-authors Calkins and Cruz taught when they led this unit.

When you launch the work with fiction, this is a chance to remind students that they already know what writers do when we are getting ready to write. We carry our notebooks with us everywhere, living our lives as writers, collecting seed ideas, and then we reread what we have collected in order to decide on a seed idea that we will develop. The next step then, is students will pull out their writers' notebooks and begin to gather entries that can help them write fiction stories. But what will those entries look like?

There is, of course, no one pathway that all fiction writers take en route to developing story ideas. You may decide to teach students that writers pay attention to the details of our own lives, letting everything provoke in us ideas for stories that we could write. Then

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

we gather those story ideas in our writer's notebook.

If you decide to teach your students that fiction writers get ideas for their stories by paying attention to the moments and issues in their lives, you might tell students, "When I was young, I thought fiction writers looked up into the clouds and imagined make-believe stories about castles and puppy dogs. But then I grew up and learned how real fiction writers get their ideas." Walter Dean Meyers got his inspiration for his books by thinking back to his childhood..." thinking back to boyhood days, I remember the bright sun on Harlem streets, the easy rhythms of black and brown bodies, the sound of students streaming in and out of red brick tenements. I remember playing basketball in Morningside Heights until it was too dark to see the basket and then climbing over the fence to go home..." "I write a lot about basketball, and I've played basketball for years and years. I was in the army and I wrote *Fallen Angels*. I lived in Harlem and I write about Harlem."

Students might write entries in which they both recount a bit of their lives and then speculate (in writing) on how they could turn this into a story. A student who has recently moved could make up a story about a girl who moved, only in this story she could give that girl a companion (a sister? an unlikely friend?), and this could be the companion the writer wished she'd had. Students can reread their notebooks in order to collect story ideas, filling their notebooks with musings about possible stories.

It is important to emphasize that in their notebooks at the start of this unit, students will not actually write their stories. Instead, they will write plans for how their stories might go. Of course, you can expect that some will misunderstand this invitation and end up collecting mere lists of totally un-developed story ideas. Write your own entry about a story you could conceivably write, using your entry as a model to show students how writers flesh out an idea. In your jottings about a possible story, write a bit about your character's traits and motivations. What does your character want? Fear? Care about? Be sure you are very specific. "My character wants to be in the school play like her older brother was (but she is so shy and worried about messing up in front of everyone). She will call her brother for advice or talk one of her friends into going with her or something like that."

You might demonstrate that you start with a small moment that you have experienced, and use it to prompt a chain of thoughts. For example, you could say, "When Joe called me names in the art room, maybe I could write a story about a boy who also gets called names but like me doesn't do anything about it until... *or maybe* I could write a story about a boy who gets called names but gets the courage to stand up for himself and eventually... *or maybe* I could write a story about a boy who is a bully and discovers he is alienating himself... *or maybe* it could be about a girl who...."

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Once your students have chosen their seed idea (which in this unit will be called their story idea) and story-told possible versions of the story many times, their instinct will be to dive right into plot.

Encourage your students to try various ways their stories might go. You might say, “Oh! I think I’ve got something here! So, in the story about the boy, maybe he could be at home because I really want to show how mean older sisters can be sometimes. And maybe there is a part where she has an argument with his sister. *Or maybe* it could take place at school because I want to show how important friends are and...”

Because you are concerned with the growth of your writers across time, not just on this one unit or this one piece, you will want to confer with a mind full of what you taught during Unit One. Hold your students to the work they have already demonstrated when writing their first narratives. Surely you will have taught them to write about focused events, to start with dialogue or a small action, to storytell rather than comment-on the event, and to write with punctuation and perhaps with paragraphs. None of this should be new during this unit, so in a conference ask yourself, “Is this student (or small group) doing all this in her entries?” If not, act dumbfounded: “How can it be?” Suggest students get their published pieces from Unit One and lay it beside them as they write more entries. “Your published piece should remind you of what you can do as a writer,” you’ll say.

For a few days then, your students will probably collect entries in which they explore ideas that could possibly become fiction stories. As they do this collecting, they will profit from trying story ideas out. A great way for them to do this is to storytell those ideas to a partner. Teach your students some techniques of storytelling. Try telling students that the beginning of their stories should sound like the beginning of a famous book or of a fairy tale. “Once, not long ago, a girl named Tanya...” You might invite students to listen to storytellers on tape or help students practice their storytelling skills by telling each other a fairy tale they know well. If you elevate their storytelling a bit, this will help them bring a storyteller’s voice—and an aura of literary language—to their own story plans. A word of caution: When students tell stories to each other, remind them that the stories need to begin and end within five minutes. It is helpful for students to become accustomed to fitting their entire story arc into a curtailed length of time.

Select a Seed Idea and then Develop Characters

If the first phase of this unit revolves around generating story ideas and selecting one, the next phase revolves around developing characters. Writers often begin with a general sense of a story-idea and begin developing the character that was central to that idea. One way to do this is to generate a list of external and internal characteristics.

Teachers, it will be important for you to plan not only the minilesson in which you show students ways to develop characters, but also the small group work and conferring you will be apt to do. For example, when students list characteristics for a character, they tend

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

to do so without thinking about how those characteristics cohere into a unified, cohesive portrait of a person. You can anticipate, then, that you will need to pull a small group to remind students that each aspect of a character doesn't happen in a vacuum. Instead, characters' internal feelings and thoughts are affected by their external traits—and vice versa. If a character is overweight, for example, this trait, listed on a page of a student's notebook bearing the heading, "External Characteristics," will have consequences on the character's self-perception. Maybe the character feels that he isn't worth being picked for a sports team, or that a classmate he likes won't want to be his friend and in turn, this will also relate to the struggles that the character encounters....Maybe the character, in fact, *doesn't* get picked for a team because he projects that he's not athletic...or, maybe he, in fact, *doesn't* muster the courage to befriend the classmate he likes because he imagines the classmate won't like him. Encourage students to think about various ways characters' external and internal traits might relate and how these factor into the events of their lives.

You will probably not invest too many days in the work of developing characters, and not because character development is not insignificant (it is!) but rather, because sometimes it is important for the writer to think between plot, theme and character. After a day of work to develop characters, encourage your students to think about their main characters' motivations and struggles, and to imagine small-moment scenes in which those might be played out. This latter is easy to say, and not always easy to do. One way to approach this task is to return to the storytelling work you began while collecting and now, instead of just *telling* the possible ways their story might go, show students how to use this same skill to now have *quick, dramatic enactments* in which they can rehearse their newly imagined characters' traits within a scene and most importantly discover things they had not thought of before. Show students how they can elicit the help of peers to play out a brief scene in which the writer becomes the narrator and tells a small bit of her imagined scene while two or three of her peers play it out. As students do this, coach in, using what they already know from the storytelling work they tried earlier: slowing down the action and telling it bit-by-bit, including not just action but what the characters are thinking and saying. In subsequent quick tries, encourage writers to weave in what they are noticing, "Oh, wow – when you tell that part again include what Michael was just doing... 'He turned around slowly, raised his arm, and pointed right at me' and tell him just what to do next." The key is to not turn these dramatic story-tells into long productions, instead they should be multiple 1-2 minute tries in which the writer gets to audition and rehearse various traits and scenarios. Then after just five intense minutes of work, the writer can grab his or her notebook and record new thinking. In classrooms where students have tried incorporating bits of drama into a fiction writing piece, teachers have been astounded by writers who rushed back to their seats brimming with new thoughts!

You will find that once students have an idea for how their story will go, they will be champing at the bit to not only get started....but to write the whole story. This is a time to teach your students that writers postpone closure, forcing ourselves to plan. Before

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

planning begins, you may want to invite your writers to spend a bit of time studying a touchstone text or two. Try to find texts your students haven't yet read. We recommend selected stories or pages from Cynthia Rylant's *Every Living Thing*, Viola Canale's *The Tequila Worm* (the chapter "Taco Head" lends itself well), and a little story, "Going, Going, Gone" from *Chicken Soup for Students*. Encourage students to read and reread these texts closely, to themselves, out loud, in partnerships. Show them how to let the language wash over them, paying attention to the rhythm of an author's voice, the way he or she begins or ends a story, how he or she creates characters, builds tension, weaves through imagery, establishes a story mountain.

Pumped up with the language and structure of published stories, students will now definitely need to draft lots of leads, and to realize each of those leads actually sets up a different story. As students do this rehearsal, be sure to help them keep their stories brief. I often tell students that in a short story, I recommend only 2-3 characters and two small moments or scenes. Of course, any one of those moments can contain a progression of micro-events, so those two 'small moments' could actually contain five or six events.

Many of us have, in previous years, suggested students plan their stories by sketching them on story mountain. This graphic organizer is in many ways a natural choice because it channels students to think about their rising action, the story's turning point, and so forth. On the other hand, there have been some ways in which the graphic organizer has proved a bit confusing to students. First of all, sometimes students (and us, as teachers, too) have interpreted the story mountain, with its plotline of dots, as suggesting that short story might contain, say, five scenes (or five small moments.) One student wanted to tell about her best friend being adopted and moving away, then returning. The young writer plotted a story line which began with she and the friend meeting each other (first dot), and then becoming fast friends (next dot), and then a letter arrives saying her friend was moving away (next dot), and so on. Such a story plan for a 3-5 page story almost guarantees that the story will be *summarized* rather than *dramatized*. It is more helpful, I think, to tell students that they can only use two scenes (or vignettes, or small moments) to capture the entire story (occasionally this can be three). So this time, the writer begins with a scene in which she walks to the mail box, finds the letter saying her friend is being adopted, goes into the house to phone her, and in the midst of congratulating her, breaks down in tears. Then the second scene might be a month later, when the narrator is lonely and alone, and something or other happens. Such a story could still be told using five or six dots on a timeline, but those dots would represent a progression within just those two the scenes.

Another source of confusion has been the fact that a story mountain has an apex. It is true that often a story is shaped more like an arc—a character wants something and over the course of the narrative that motivation is somehow addressed—but in the sequence of a story there is not always one, single, turning point moment. It is helpful to teach students that the story *does* need to show characters changing, so it would not work to simply write a story saying, "Bob got a bike." Did he want one very much and then finally get it?

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Did he realize then that he preferred to walk to school with his friend than to ride? This sort of development work is crucial. However, it is less crucial for a writer to worry about what the exact turning point of a story might be.

Using Mini-Books to Rehearse Writing

If you decide to not use a story mountain as the way to help students plan their stories, you might instead suggest that students rehearse for writing by storytelling across mini-books. A writer or a teacher can make a mini-booklet in three seconds by taking a sheet of blank (or lined) paper and then folding it up first in half, then in half again, turning it into small a booklet (yielding four sides, or six or eight sides if you make some quick tears). Students can then quickly practice telling their story across pages over and over, touching the portion of the book that would contain the portion of the story the student is telling. Show students how you touch a page in the mini-book and say the whole story of that scene, “Jessica walked past the lockers on her way to Math class and saw Megan talking and laughing with Tiana. They keep looking over at her. [Flip page.] Then, Jessica went to the classroom and no one was sitting around her...” You then show students how you revise right now and try it a different way. You might say, “Wow, it seems like my story is taking a long time to get started! I only have a few pages to tell the story and I haven’t even gotten to the good part where Jessica confronts Tiana! So *maybe* the beginning could instead be [point to first page], Jessica goes into the Math room and no one is near her seat, and *maybe* Jessica sees Tiana is over by the library with a bunch of others whispering. [Flip page.] Then, maybe...” The important thing is that whether students use mini-books and storytelling or story mountain, the goal is for a writer to try out lots of different ways that a story could go, revising the plan multiple times, before ever putting pen to paper.

Even though you will emphasize rehearsal for writing, it is almost inevitable that students will begin writing their drafts before you have had a chance to confer with each of them enough to feel confident that their plans will pay off. The problem is that once students have started writing, it will become especially difficult to get around among all of them and intervene to lift the level of what they are doing. Each student’s piece will be long, and each student’s plans will be complex and long-winded. To help with this, emphasize revisions that are large scale enough that they involve writing one draft, then stopping that draft after a bit (perhaps after a page and a half) and writing a whole other draft. You will also want to be certain that you are holding many small group conferences during this time, so you are seeing—and pushing—more students to take on this big work.

Crafting and Revising Stories: Developing the Heart, Considering Endings

As your students work on drafting the story, you can teach them strategies that fiction writers rely upon to control time, to write engaging leads, to animate every scene with action and setting. Draw on the book *Writing Fiction* from the series, *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3-5* (Heinemann, 2006), for support. It will be important for students to see that the plot of a story builds to a high point, and that their main characters make harder and harder climbs toward their goals. It is helpful to have students draft their

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

stories across several pages, with the first two or three pages telling one small moment story, and the next two or three pages telling the story of a second scene.

During this phase, remind students that in all narrative writing, we focus our pieces not only by narrowing the time-frame in which we write but also by deciding on the angle from which to tell a story. We ask ourselves, “What is this story about? What do I want my reader to take away?” and then we craft every part of our stories – the beginning, the middle, the end – around the answer to those questions. A story about a boy who learns to swim will unfold very differently if it’s angled to be about the boy overcoming his fear of water to join his friends in the local pool, versus if it’s angled to be about a boy whose goal it is to be an Olympic swimmer one day.

Once writers have a sense of what they are trying to say and have begun drafting their two or three main scenes, we will then want to teach them to find and develop the section that they believe is the heart of the story. We will teach them to ask, “What is the heart of my story?” and then scissor the draft apart, and tape a whole blank page into the section which had once contained an abbreviated version of that section of the story. This time, when writers write that one section, they’ll stretch it out so the key moment is almost a full page.

You can also help writers revise by helping them develop tension in a story. You can teach students to do this by helping them increase a character’s motivation and then, later, increase the obstacles the character must face. Writers might also revise to give more details about time or place in every scene, and how those progress. We might teach them that between the two (or three) major scenes, there is often a passage of time. For some writers, the transition between the two scenes might be carried off by a phrase such as, “Later that day...” whereas for other writers it might become more subtle work of showing the passage of time. A writer could have the sun move across the sky or a different meal be served, “Dad pulled the chicken out of the oven and began slicing off pieces for everyone, the sun was low in the sky when Jessica told her family about what had happened.”

Oftentimes in student drafts, the character magically receives his or her fondest dream in the form of a solution that flies in out of nowhere like Superman. Likewise, usually when students embark on a story, they plan for the main character to win the award, to be invited to the party, to find the missing item.... All you need to do is to ask students whether lives actually turn out that way. Do people always win the awards? Do people always receive the wanted gift? When life doesn’t turn out as we hope it will, *that’s* when people dig down inside and surprise and outgrow themselves. That’s when the real inner action occurs. If teachers encourage students to rethink the pat, easy endings, those students will not only learn about writing-to-discover, they will also learn that people grow through times of difficulty, and that when someone closes a door, often there is a window somewhere that remains open. With your help, students can see that the solutions writers find in fiction—as in life—are generally those that we find ourselves.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

For some students, the solutions tend to be more of an emotional realization than of a major surprise action. We could demonstrate, “You know, right now in my story the problem is solved because a teacher comes into the hallway and sees how Tiana is treating Jessica, but it seems almost like Superman landed and saved the day! Jessica didn’t really get the chance to do anything! Instead, maybe Jessica looks in Tiana’s eyes for a second and realizes that she understands her more than she thought before. Or maybe Jessica realizes that Tiana might just go on talking about her behind her back, but that Jessica doesn’t have to believe what Tiana says...” We can invite our writers to consider the answers that have often been before our eyes all along.

Because literary vocabulary continues to challenge many emergent readers and writers, begin word walls and word work early. In reading, we described word walls containing lists of words describing characters, such as words for *sad*, *happy*, *brave*, etc. These help writers also! Under *sad*, we might have a list that goes from *glum* and *gloomy* to *despondent* and *desolate*. As such, the list moves from words that are just a little sad, to words that are *very* sad. We are not going to teach dictionary definitions for these words, but instead are going to use them in read aloud, partner talk, post-its, and writing.

This work has to start early. If students just begin word work in the weeks before the test, they tend to sprinkle these words willy-nilly, to overload or to repeat, and to misspell. This ‘use and confuse’ stage, while endearing and appropriate to their development, does not help their preparation for the test – we need to move them slowly into some mastery, which is best done if they do this kind of word work all year long.

Word Study to Support Writing Workshop

Last month we suggested that you emphasize with your emergent writers the importance of giving spelling their best try *and moving on*. We praised students who used fancy vocabulary, even when unsure of exactly how to spell the words, and we taught students to reread their own writing and edit it *on their own*. This month you should expect students to continue doing this work throughout the whole unit, not just at the end. Now, you can add to their growing knowledge of strategies for spelling words in writing workshop by teaching them to use word analogies for using spelling patterns that they will have learned during your separate word study time of day. You can teach students to use the strategy, “If I know _____ then I can spell _____.” “If I know *light*, then I can spell *bright*, or *fight*, or *sight*.” You can demonstrate this strategy across the day, pretending to get stuck on words, and then calling upon familiar words to help you out. Encourage students to remind each other of this strategy as well. You could say to your students, “Instead of just spelling words for your partner when they ask for help, remind them of the strategies we know.” To help students out, you’ll probably want a chart in the room that lists the main spelling strategies you’ve emphasized so far this year. You’ll also want to make sure that you maintain the sense that what matters is giving it your best try, and writing independently, not necessarily spelling perfectly.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Publishing

Finally, at the conclusion of the unit we can open our students up to do what they have been excited to do all along, publishing and publicly sharing their writing!

Before moving into a new genre in the next unit, you will most likely want to have your students do another on-demand narrative, allowing you to examine their growth across these two units of narrative writing, once again comparing their work to the continuum assessment and making plans for how their writing life will continue to grow.

Unit Three – Essay Study: Personal and Literary

November

In this unit you will teach students to write idea-based pieces in which they continue to craft powerful subjects and control structure, now in non-narrative form. This unit of study invites students into the difficult and exhilarating work of learning to write well within an expository structure. As middle school educators, we sense the urgency and importance of non-narrative writing for our students. We also understand that adolescents need to be able to be independent, rigorous and successful in this genre. Therefore, students need scaffolding and support in order to experience the process of writing effective essays. In this unit, you will reduce some of the complexity of finished essays, highlight the most essential moves an essayist must make, and show students that these moves are within their reach. You'll elongate the process of writing an essay in order to show students how to do each aspect of this work, and to give them practice at each one. In a future unit of study, you can show students how to write essays more quickly, on the run. This way, your middle school students will gain the experience and success with this type of writing.

Before beginning this unit, double check in your mind whether you want this unit to be a unit on the personal essay, the persuasive essay, or the literary essay. We recommend that sixth graders write personal, seventh writer persuasive, and eighth write literary. If you decide to teach the literary essay now, remember the write-up assumes that the students have had a strong prior experience writing personal essays. If they have not had those experiences, you may want to gather some aspects of this write-up and merge them into the discussion of literary essay. The decision between the personal and the persuasive essay is a choice of nuance and tone. Persuasive essays are probably a bit easier to write and they are probably less conducive to writing with self-awareness and insight, and more conclusive to a bare bones sort of argument-and-support structure. The write-up can support both persuasive and personal essay.

At the start of this unit, you will point out to writers that they could conceivably write about a topic—say a visit to the Dominican Republic—as a narrative, retelling it chronologically, or as a non-narrative piece, also referred to as an essay, in which case they'll advance a certain idea (“Visits to the Dominican Republic feel like going home,” for example). You will teach students that the terms *narrative* and *non-narrative* (or *essay*) refer to structure and genre, not to content. For some students, the fact that they

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

can write about personal topics in a genre other than personal narrative will be a new realization. In this unit, each student will write a personal essay in which he or she advances a theme of personal significance, arguing, for example, “It’s hard being different,” or claiming, “My father is my best teacher.”

This unit merits some time. It’s no small task to teach adolescents how to write modest yet well-structured and competent essays. The first step is to help students write rough drafts. Once they understand the basic structure of an essay, they’ll move on to doing lots of revision with the goal of learning as much as possible about logical thought. Then, after helping kids spend two to three weeks writing one essay, you can give them the option of churning out a quick essay in a day, and revising it on the next, and then show them how to write an essay using the revision strategies they know in one period. Take your time investing in this work – your effort will have enormous payoffs.

Strategies for Generating and Elaborating Upon Essay Writing

As with any unit of study in a writing workshop, you’ll begin by helping students develop a repertoire of strategies for collecting entries—this time, essay entries. It’s important to teach students that their lives are provocative. Writers observe things in the world, recording what we see in all its detail, and then we shift and write, “The thought I have about this is. . .” or, “This makes me realize. . .” For example, a student could spend a minute unloading the chaos in his backpack, saying ‘I see. . .’ and then listing the items as he pulls them out. He might come across a pristine academic planner that his mother had given him, hoping he would keep track of his school assignments. After describing the planner (“I see. . .”) he would shift to something like, “and the thought I have about this is. . .that a lot of people spend time trying to keep me organized, but to no avail.” Writers can use this strategy to observe stuff that is literally before our eyes, or we can mentally travel to a provocative place—say, the family kitchen—and observe, then push off into writing-to-think. When teaching students to grow essays out of everyday observations, you will really be teaching them to free-write in writers’ notebooks. The goal is to help kids realize the value of writing at length without a preconceived content, trusting that ideas will surface as they go along. Students also learn the power of imagining themselves in an evocative place and generating ideas in response to what they “see.”

During this early phase of the unit, you may also want to teach students that they can reread entries they collected earlier in the year during narrative units of study and use those entries as starting points, perhaps beginning, “The idea I have about this is. . .” or “The thing that surprises me about this is. . . .” A student might jot down a topic that he cares about, then collect ideas about that big subject and write at length about one of those ideas. Or, just as earlier in the year you taught your students to generate ideas for writing *personal narrative* by jotting down a person who mattered to them and then listing *small moments* they had spent with that person, they could now jot down a person and list *big ideas* they have about that person. If an adolescent’s grandmother has been growing elderly before her eyes, she might jot “Nana” and then list big ideas she has about her: it is hard to watch the strongest person in your life become vulnerable, my grandmother is teaching me that few things matter

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

more than family ties.... After listing ideas in such a manner, students will take one of those ideas and write for a time about it. Minilessons teaching students to use these and other strategies are available in the *Units of Study* series.

Of course, if you teach a particular strategy for generating essay-entries, this doesn't mean the entire class needs to use the strategy you have just taught! Students by now should be accustomed to selecting the strategy that works best for that student on any given occasion. That is, the strategy you introduce in a mini-lesson on a particular day is not that day's assignment, as is more usual in traditional instruction, but is one of many in a growing repertoire of strategies that writers can draw on as needed.

You and your students can think of your own wonderful ways to collect provocative ideas. Perhaps your students will decide to read a novel for a few minutes, close the book and write, "The thought I have about this is..." Similarly, your students might decide to quickly discuss a current event in the world or recent happening in their community, return to their notebooks and write an idea they have. A student might jot down topics, hobbies, or issues that he or she cares about, then collect ideas about that big subject and write off one of them. This means that when a writer's goal is to write an essay, the notebook's purpose is to provide a time and place for the writer to grow provocative, insightful ideas so that when it comes time to choose one idea to advance in an essay, the writer has a wealth of possibilities from which to choose. If a writer's goal is to grow provocative interesting ideas, the writer's entries will not usually look like miniature essays, nor will the writer immediately shift from stating an idea towards providing evidence for that idea. Adolescents, when they do this, will write ideas such as, 'My Mom is important to me' or 'I am good at basketball' and then they write, 'For example,' and cite examples. At this stage, it is more important for them to linger for awhile within writing-about-ideas.

Essayists need tools to push past their first thoughts—to linger for awhile within writing-about-ideas—and many find it helpful to use thought-prompts to prime the pump of their ideas. "The surprising thing about this is..." an essayist might write in her notebook before spinning out a brand new thought in letters that scrawl down the page. That is, once a student records an idea, the student will benefit from having strategies to elaborate upon that idea. Using prompts such as, "to add on . . .," or "furthermore . . .," allows students to extend their first ideas and to use writing as a way of thinking. Remind your students that when they finish one entry, they will want to skip a line and then write another, and another.

Teach Writers to Choose an Idea, to Write It as a Thesis, and to Build the Structure for the Essay

After collecting possible ideas, drawing on what they already know about rereading notebooks, young essayists will select one idea. In the earlier, narrative units of study, they selected one *story*; this time they will select an *idea*. Encourage students to reread in order to select and expand upon ideas that seem especially important or interesting.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Students need to understand that they do this work to try to have ideas that are fresh and important and worth developing.

When students wrote narratives, they used timelines or story mountains, or mini-books to plan out the sequence of what they would write. When writing essays, it is equally important to plan out the sequence, but this time the sequence will involve categories, or sections. Once students have selected and articulated an idea (“The Dominican Republic feels like home to me,” for example), you will want to teach them that one way to think about the categories, or subordinate ideas, that they will address is to think about their seed idea, and then list a few parallel reasons that support this claim. Writers can restate the claim over and over, each time adding the transitional word *because* followed by a reason:

- The Dominican Republic feels like home because...my adolescent memories are there.
- The Dominican Republic feels like home because...my extended family is there.
- The Dominican Republic feels like home because...my first language is spoken there.

Repeating the stem of the thesis over and over results in a list that is full of redundancy, but this can eventually be eliminated. Early on, however, if the writer does not repeat the stem for each new item in the list, many writers lose all coherence. There are other ways to support a claim (or thesis), and a teacher may or may not teach those alternatives.

During this planning stage, students can explore their subordinate ideas and decide which they really want to defend. In the end, we hope each student has a main idea (a claim or a thesis) and several parallel supporting ideas. Teachers sometimes refer to the main idea and supporting statements as “boxes and bullets.”

We have found it helps if students take their thesis and record it on the outside of a folder, then make smaller internal folders for each of their bullets (topic sentences). You may decide upon a different way to help students collect and sort entries that support the frame of their essays.

Gathering Material for an Essay, then Selecting the Most Compelling and Appropriate Material and Constructing a Draft

When it is time to teach students to collect materials to support their topic sentences, you will probably want to teach them that they can first collect micro-stories that illustrate their ideas. It is also important to teach students to angle these stories so they highlight and support the idea the writer wants to advance, and for them to learn to “unpack” those stories, just as a teacher debriefs after a demonstration in a minilesson. After teaching students that writers sometimes collect angled stories, students will have lots of opportunities to practice this technique and become proficient at it because they will collect angled stories within each of their folders, substantiating each of their topic sentences. They also, of course, may revise these in order to bring out the point they want to make. Keep in mind that during one day of a writing workshop, a student might collect

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

three or four angled stories, filing these in the appropriate folder. That is, it would not be considered a day's work for a student to write one tiny anecdote supporting one of the student's three topic sentences!

Essayists "unpack" their micro-stories by adding a sentence or two after the story in which they discuss how the story illustrates the main idea. A middle school student wrote about how glad she was that her grandmother finally taught her how to make an old family recipe during the holidays. Then she wrote a story about how she studied her grandmother making the dish. She wrote how she tried making the dish the next year for her family. The student's story ended, "I had completely ruined the dish by leaving it in the oven for too long." The story completely transformed into an anecdote that illustrated a point when this writer added the line, "I'm still thinking about how my grandmother passed down an old family recipe and making me apart of a tradition."

Writers can also collect lists to support their topic sentences. We often use Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech as a model text for these lists. Additionally, you might show students how statistics, observations, citations, quotations, and so forth can enrich their work. Students can not only employ strategies they learned from past experiences writing essays, they can also develop strategies of their own. It is important to make a big deal out of a student who "invents" a new way to gather ideas. If these bits are collected not in a writer's notebook but on separate bits of paper, they can be filed in the appropriate topic sentence folders.

It is important to help writers select *compelling* evidence from the material they collect in these folders, and to help them ensure that the evidence closely supports their claim. We teach them to look carefully from the claim to the evidence and back again because often the two aren't as congruent as they appear at first glance. Eventually we teach writers to sort through the materials in each folder, writing well-structured paragraphs.

Once writers have selected the most powerful and pertinent support material for each of their topic sentences, they staple or tape or recopy this information into a paragraph or two that supports each topic sentence, and in this manner construct the rough draft of an essay. Special lessons on transitions, introductions, and conclusions are important here.

Partnerships

Writing partnerships will have become part of the fabric of your classroom by now, so you might move into teaching students how to give each other specific compliments about each other's process, as well as the products. You might teach students to say something such as, "I'm really impressed by the way you kept gathering lots of little thoughts that didn't seem all that connected – but then you re-read those entries to find a connection that I could never have guessed was there." We also may want to teach students to use what they know about good writing in order to not only compliment well, but also to make suggestions on areas in which the writer could improve. You might also want to teach students to ask helpful questions of each other, such as, "What are you

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

trying to say in your piece? What part are you not sure about? Can you be more specific?"

Writers may meet together not only in partnerships but also, from time to time, in student-led small groups. Some teachers who have created particularly vibrant communities have spaces in the classroom where students can ask for and offer help to their fellow writers. One example of such a space would be a bulletin board where students might post their needs under a "help wanted" sign, and their talents under "help offered."

Literary Essays

Just as writing allows us to pause in the hurry of our lives, to really notice and experience and reflect on our lives, so, too, writing can give us a tool to pause in our hurried reading and to really pay attention to the characters and ideas in our books. This unit aims to make reading a more intense, thoughtful experience for adolescents, and to equip adolescents to write expository essays that advance an idea about a piece of literature. The unit relies upon adolescents already writing personal essays, and essentially the unit suggests they do similar work, only this time towards the goal of writing an essay about a text.

In order for adolescents to write about reading in this way, you will need to decide which piece(s) of literature your adolescents will unpack in the unit. If your students are reading novels and talking about the deeper meanings of those novels in book clubs, you could conceivably use literary essays as a way to harvest their interpretations, and to cross fertilize between your reading and writing workshops. On the other hand, that is not essential to this unit. Your students could write literary essays about a short story or a picture book, and this could be a text that they read during the writing workshop itself.

In some ways it is easiest for adolescents to write literary essays about a short text such as a short story, and in some ways this is more difficult for them. Certainly when middle school students write about a short text, it is easier for them to know that text really well, rereading it several times and mining it in conversations with others. Then, too, they can locate evidence easily without spending lots of time rereading to find excerpts. On the other hand, any theory an adolescent might espouse will probably have thinner substantiating support when the text on hand is a short one. For example, if a student claims that Gabriel, in the 3 page long story, *Spaghetti*, is lonely, there will not be endless bits of evidence the student can draw upon to make this case!

In any case, you will decide whether students are writing literary essays about short texts that they may read during the writing workshop or whether they are writing about longer texts that they read and discuss during reading time. For the purpose of this write-up, we'll assume they are reading short texts. We recommend you provide students with a small folder containing three or four possible texts, letting the writer select which of those texts 'speaks' to that writer. When writers have choices and can write about topics

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

they care about, the writing is better. And in this instance, the first choice is the choice of text, the second is the choice of what to say about that text.

If you provide students with a small collection of short texts and invite them to browse through these, finding a couple to read and write about and talk about, be sure that you include a text that is easy enough that your more struggling readers can read that text. And remember, these texts can be ones that you and your class have studied throughout the year. There is nothing to be gained from the texts being unfamiliar ones. One way to support your strugglers is to direct these students straight away to a text that you believe will work for them so that all the work they do during the earliest days of the unit ends up being work that cumulates and ‘counts.’ Others may take some time reading and writing about a variety of texts before settling on the one that they will address.

You will probably select one text as a mentor text, threading that one short story through many minilessons, using your responses to it as a way to show students how people go about reading, thinking, and writing about that one story. You’ll plan to chart what you do with that one story, using words that can apply to any writer and any text, and then those charts can remind students of the work they can be doing with their own stories. Again, one way to support strugglers is for you to do some work with the text that you hope they, in fact, will use as the centerpiece of their inquiries. We encourage you to provide stories that are rich, complex, and well-crafted enough that they reward close study. If you are not sure of a source for these stories, Avi’s book, *What Do Fish Have To Do with Anything?* or Walter Dean Myers’ *What They Found: Love on 145th Street* both have some wonderful examples. If you are looking for picture books, Eve Bunting has nice work to draw on. Of course, the possibilities are endless.

On each of the first few days of the unit, you may decide to demonstrate a way of reading and writing off of a story, and then invite students to draw from this repertoire of strategies as they work with any text they choose from their packets. You could remind students that just as essayists pay attention to our lives, expecting to grow ideas from this wide-awake attentiveness, so, too, literary essayists pay attention to texts. Invite students to look closely at a text and to write, ‘I see....’ And then write what they notice. Encourage them to write long about this, extending their observation by adding, ‘The surprising thing about this is...’ or ‘The important thing about this is...’ or ‘The thought this gives me is....’ Or ‘I wonder if....’

If you decide to teach students to look closely at a text, realizing that any text can yield and yield and yield, you may want to try to do the same with students’ own writing. You’ll find that students say little comments that at first could seem trite or obvious. The way to get beyond those comments to something deeper is not to dismiss them, brushing them away, but rather to be fascinated by them, leading students to say more.

At first, students may roam about reading from the collection of texts you give them, but within a few days you will want each student to choose a story that especially speaks to

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

that student, and then to collect entries just about that story. The process of choosing a seed idea in this unit, then, becomes double-pronged. First, a student chooses a story. Then, the student lives with that one story and gathers entries about it. Eventually, the student will also reread those entries to choose a seed idea – a claim – about that story.

You can remind students of their work in the personal essay unit, when they observed their lives and created “thought patches” in their notebooks by writing, “The thought I have about this is...” or “This makes me realize that...” In this unit, they can pause as they read to observe what is happening to a character and then grow an idea using the same sentence starters. You can teach students that these “thought patches” can be extended, and that they can use “thought prompts” to grow their thinking.

Be aware that students are apt to try to extend their thinking by providing examples only, and you will want to help them to linger with these ideas, too. Teach them to record an idea using new words by saying, “that is...” or “in other words...” and then rephrasing the idea. Teach them to entertain possibilities by writing, “could it be that...” or “perhaps...” or “some may say that...” Phrases such as “furthermore...” or “this connects with...” or “on the other hand,” or “but you might ask...” or “this is true because...” or “I am realizing that...” can also keep students elaborating upon their ideas. If you hope that students will write literary essays in which they articulate the lessons they believe a character learns in a story, or essays that name the theme or idea a text teaches, then it will be important for you to provide students with strategies for growing these sorts of ideas in particular.

The Heinemann book, *Literary Essays*, from the upper grade writing series can provide you with very specific help—mini-lesson suggestions and so forth—if you’d like such a resource. Tom Romano’s, *Crafting Authentic Voice* is also helpful.

After students have collected responses-to-reading in their writers’ notebooks for at least a week, remind them that they already know how to reread a notebook in order to find seed ideas. In the personal essay unit, students will have literally found seed *ideas*, and they’ll need to do something similar to that exercise now. You can ask them to look for a seed idea that is central to the story and provocative. You can also help them generate possible seed ideas. Some students will benefit from writing inside this general structure: “This is a story about ... (someone), who is ... (how?) at the start of the story, but then ends up... (how?).” That could be written differently: “This is about so and so who learns such and such. Early in the text....Later in the text....” That is, some students will find success if they try writing a sentence or two in which they lay out what the character was like at the start of the story, contrasting this with how the character turned out at the end. “*Your Move* is the story of two brothers, one older, one younger, who both learn about risk-taking, membership and choices when they spend a night out with a gang of boys.” “*Spaghetti* is the story of a lonely boy, Gabriel, who learns to open himself to love.”

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Some students may want to write a thesis statement within this structure: “When I first read, I thought it was about (the external plot driven story,) but now, rereading it, I realize it is about (the internal story.)” This thesis would lead a writer to first write about the plot, the external story, and then write about the theme, or the under-story.

You will need to help each student revise his or her “seed idea” so that it is a clear thesis, making sure it is a claim or an idea, not a fact or a question. Help students imagine how they can support the thesis in a few paragraphs. Usually for students in grades 6-8, the first support paragraph(s) will show how the student’s claim was true at the start of the story. And the next support paragraph(s) will show that it was true later in the story as well. It may be that the first support paragraph shows how the claim was true for one reason, the next, for a second reason.

Once a student has planned his or her “boxes and bullets” for a literary essay, the student will need to collect the information and insights needed to build the case. You can decide whether you’ll encourage each student to make a file for each topic sentence (and each support paragraph). For example, if the student’s claim is, “Langston Hughes’ story, *Thank You, M’am* is the story of a troubled boy who learns about gratitude from a woman he tries to rob,” the student might title one file, “Roger is a troubled boy” and another, “Roger learns about gratitude.” Each of these files eventually will become a paragraph (or larger) in the final essay.

On the other hand, students could bypass the process of gathering information into files, instead using rough forms of outlines to plan the content of a paragraph, then writing one support paragraph on one page, and the other on another page.

You will need to teach writers how to cite references from a text and how to unpack these citations, talking about how the citation addresses the relevant big idea. Before this unit is over, you may want to teach students that writers of literary essays use the vocabulary of their trade, incorporating literary terms such as “narrator,” “point of view,” “scenes,” and the like.

You may also want to teach students to write introductory paragraphs that include a tiny summary of the story. Closing paragraphs should link the story’s message to the writer’s own life—the ending is a good place for a Hallmark moment! “This story teaches me that I, too. . . .” An alternative is to link this story to another story, or even to a social issue in the world.

Word Study to Support Writing Workshop

In September and October we emphasized writing quickly, giving tricky words your best try and moving on. We also taught students to use words they know to help them spell unfamiliar words. You’ll want to keep referring to these strategies throughout November, for your emergent writers, not just at the end when your students are getting ready to

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

publish. Once an editing strategy is introduced, it should become part of students' writing – all the time, not just at the end of a unit.

By now your students will have studied many spelling patterns and high frequency words through word sorts for spelling patterns, if you're using Words Their Way, and through the word wall, if you've been teaching commonly misspelled high frequency words. It's important to teach students specifically how to use the word wall, and the charts that come out of their word study, during writing workshop. Never assume that just because the chart or word wall is there, that your students will automatically use it! During the editing phase of this unit, you may want to teach your students explicitly that when they use the word wall, they should look up at the whole word and take a pretend "photograph" of the whole word, then write the *entire* word as best they can without peeking, and check it one more time against the word wall after they've given it their best try. They should try *not* to look at the word one letter at a time, copying one letter at a time – words are learned by practicing the whole word. This time of year is also a good time to do a quick informal assessment by looking across students' independent writing to see which high frequency words many kids continue to misspell. Even if you already introduced those words as word wall words, you may revisit them again and again until most of your students have begun to spell them correctly in their independent writing.

Unit Four – Writing with Independence: Preparing for the Writing Tasks of the State Test (ELA Exam): The Extended Response Essays

*December/
Early
January*

Thinking about the Unit and Learning from the Tests and Rubrics

One thing that state tests across the nation have taught us is that the tests demand writers who are flexible and resilient, who compose swiftly, and with fluency. These young writers need to be able to write on demand about subjects with which they may not be familiar. They need to be able to do this using text support from texts that may be inaccessible, and to support an idea constructed in response to a prompt. They need to write with clear structure, with some sense of voice and style, and they need to use helpful and visible transitions in their writing. Finally, their vocabulary needs to be sophisticated and literary. That is what is on the rubric for the New York State Test and probably it is on the rubric in other states as well. To prepare students to write for the state test, we need to prepare them to write for specific tasks, knowing what is on the rubric.

The New York State ELA rubric emphasizes four elements: *structure*, which is most clearly evident by a thesis and supporting evidence in clearly indented paragraphs, with an introduction that makes the prompt into a thesis statement, and a conclusion that states what has been argued, and perhaps offers an additional insight; *text support*, which is clearly shown by quoting or paraphrasing or referencing the text or texts that are given; *craft*, which is clearly shown by the use of details, by transitions, long and short sentence structure, control of conventions, and literary vocabulary; and *insight*, which is shown

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

most easily. Ideas about the text and by making *connections outside of or beyond* the text, but that are clearly related to the text. Almost all state tests measure student writing by these qualities, they simply name them with different terms on their rubrics. The NYS ELA values these qualities.

It's tempting, but not that effective, to keep studying last year's tests – then we keep preparing students for last year's test. If, for example, last year's sixth grade had to write about two stories, we then prepare this year's students to write about two stories. However, then this year they may very well be given a story and an article. One year their prompt may be highly literal, not requiring much work to make it into a thesis. The next year, the prompt may require students to take a position in order to create a thesis. One year, eighth grade had to write on a story and an article, and the same was true of the next year, and so we might prepare them only for those genres. But when the test arrives, the eighth graders have to write about a story and a poem. The next year it may be an article and a poem! It's better, then, to study the common tasks of the test and the skills they require, and then to look at the rubric, which remains the same across all of these tasks.

Clearly, what we need is to prepare students in 6th and 8th grade, in New York, for two main kinds of writing tasks. They have to listen to a story or article and write in response to it, and they have to read two texts and write a response. It will be good if they are ready to write about any combination of two texts. So, students who have written about poems, about stories, and about articles, will be prepared to write about these texts. We can look in the curriculum for other places, then, where students may practice this kind of writing.

When we look at the rubric, it is clear that students who have spent a lot of time writing, who are comfortable backing up their ideas with evidence, who can mine texts for text support, who control a clear essay structure, who can draft and revise on the run, and who control appropriate conventions so their writing is lucid and persuasive, will be fine. Fortunately, this is work that we prepare them to do over years of writing workshop. It does emphasize why we need students to be writing every day on topics they care about. If the day of the test is the first day that your students are asked to write two to three pages in forty five minutes, this task alone is going to be difficult for them. So as you look ahead to the day of the test, ask yourself how often in your writing workshop students write two to three pages a day? You'll see why you did so much high –interest writing, about subjects' students knew a lot about and cared deeply about, early on in the year, in order for students to build tremendous fluency.

In addition to fluency, they need to have already internalized a strong voice, a sense of personal style, and an expectation that they will try to be insightful. It's too hard for students to develop a sense of voice and style when writing to prompts, and yet they cannot get the highest scores without this sense of voice, style, and insight. They need to be used to making connections through writing – using writing in order to think, in other

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

words. They also need to be comfortable applying their knowledge of structure and craft to any genre and prompt they are given.

This means that, going into this unit, students need to have written essays. If they wrote their first essay this year, and they spent several weeks on one essay, then it's critical to follow that by coaching them to use what they know to write an essay in a few days. Then, follow that up with some on-demand essays that take one period to write and one to revise, which will help students keep applying what they know with greater automaticity *and* still give them opportunities to improve their essay writing through some coached revision. More and more, as you move through these steps, you want to see that common revision such as transitions and literary language begins to show up in the drafts and on-demand pieces.

You might think of a schedule in which in your first week you remind students of what they know about writing essays, and you show them how to write an essay about a familiar story (more of this will be explored below). You'll teach them to draft a simple essay, and then to learn some ways to revise it the second day. Then you'll probably do it again on a story or article they can write about well. The next week you may show them how to write about more than one text at a time, and also how to do some of the predictable revision work that will improve their writing (working with paragraph structure, literary language, text evidence). Then you will want to show them how to do this revision even before they work a draft, so their work is paragraphed and their ideas are supported from the start. If students need more support on introductions and conclusions, then you can do that work, and save the writing about two texts for week three. In the second week, regardless, they'll write two essays, with one day to write and one day to revise, compare, and make plans for what they would do next time. The third week you can show them how to write across any two texts (articles, poems, etc) that have a related subject or view point. Again students will probably write and revise two essays that week. That will then leave you time for students to work for a week on individual goals, and small group work, predictably around using text evidence, making connections, writing legibly, etc.

Literary vocabulary continues to challenge many emergent readers and writers, begin word walls and word work early. In reading, we described word walls containing lists of words describing characters, such as words for *sad*, *happy*, *brave*, etc. Under *sad*, we might have a list that goes from *glum* and *gloomy* to *despondent* and *desolate*. As such, the list moves from words that are just a little sad, to words that are *very* sad. We are not going to teach dictionary definitions for these words, but instead are going to use them in read aloud, partner talk, post-its, and writing about reading. Writing for the test, is, of course, writing about reading. When students first begin writing about texts, they may notice characters' moods and emotions (their traits). Push them to revise their writing using words from the word wall.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

A second word wall that is useful for students is a word wall that describes texts, using categories such as *interesting, sad, inspiring, helpful, and moving*. Underneath these categories, there can be words such as *fascinating, gloomy, inspirational, informative, provocative*, etc. Use these words in conversation about the texts you read in class – is it informative? Is it instructive? Is it provocative? Is it predictable? Is it surprising? Get these words up.

Finally, when students write essays, a chart of transition words and phrases really helps them to elevate the tone and clarify the structure of their essays. *First, next, finally, as well, similarly, on the other hand, nevertheless, therefore, as one can see, it is clear, it becomes evident, surprisingly, remarkably, in a similar story, this idea becomes clear*, etc. are examples of these kinds of transitions and sentence starters.

This work has to start early. If students just begin word work in the weeks before the test, they tend to sprinkle these words willy-nilly, to overload or to repeat, and to misspell. This ‘use and confuse’ stage, while endearing and appropriate to their development, does not help their preparation for the test – we need to move them slowly into some mastery, which is best done if they do this kind of word work all year long.

Getting Ready

Our goal is to teach students to use what they know about writing essays, and using text evidence, to write clearly structured response essays. They need clear introductions and transitions, clear text evidence to support their thesis, and a conclusion that makes a small insight or comparison, or at least restates the thesis and claims to have proven it. Their handwriting has to be neat, the essay should get onto the second page, and their paragraphs need to be clearly indented. They need to stay focused on the task and not wander into interesting but not relevant topics. Their job is to answer the question and to support the answer with evidence from the text. This is doable, as it builds on prior teaching.

In all of this writing, students need to work swiftly and purposefully, planning what they will say in their head or quickly on paper, and then drafting, using what they know about non-narrative writing to state a clear idea and back it up convincingly with evidence. They have time to jot a quick “boxes and bullets” draft plan that includes the thesis and the evidence they’ll use, but that’s all they have time for. Then they need to write, revising in their head as they go, striving for accurate spelling, looking back over their conventions for accuracy, using details from the text when possible.

Moving Into Response Essays: Having Ideas About Texts and Backing Them Up with Evidence

The first thing you need to teach students is that when readers have ideas about texts, they back them up with evidence from the text. To launch this work, teach students to talk and write about ideas they develop about your read aloud and the chapter books they are reading. This will not be new thinking for your students; you are just asking them to

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

do it formally in quick writing—to write down their ideas in actual essay form with a thesis and two or three supports. Go with two supports to get them started if you want, as there's no learning benefit from using three supports when they are learning to write with structure, transitions, and text evidence. Also, don't make a huge deal out of this, as if it's really hard, and don't introduce fancy draft plans and templates, none of which they will get on the test. In fact, tell them this will be easy for them and remind them of what they already know about writing essays, and about talking about stories.

Last year, we learned that even our struggling readers and writers could collaboratively talk through ideas for an essay on an easy, familiar read aloud, and get started on this essay. Then we could teach them how to revise it for paragraphs, transitions, and literary language. This was so much easier than assuming they had to start from scratch. Also, it meant that by day one, kids had a draft going, and by day two, they revised and finished it and could start another. They need to draft, revise, and do it again. They can't spend weeks on a draft when they will have 50 minutes to write their essay on the test.

This part of your teaching, then, shows them how to state an idea and go back to the text for evidence to support it, as well as how to do this writing work swiftly and with a minimum of fuss because they already know about thesis-based, non-narrative writing structure from unit three. For revision, teach them to use transitions, paragraphs and perhaps some literary vocabulary. Don't rewrite the essays, just add these things in. Do small group work for those who need support gathering text evidence. Thus, they write an essay on one day, revise it on the next. Try one essay on a story. Try one essay on an article. Perhaps try one essay on a poem. Use familiar texts from read aloud, so that you can teach students how to be successful at this work—they have to get this structure totally down, and they need to internalize the habits of writing in paragraph structure, of restating the thesis, of quoting or paraphrasing the text. You'll only move them to harder texts when they have the structure down. Again and again, we see students dropping their structure when the text gets hard. This structure has to become something that is inside their bones, which they get by writing and revising and going through the process again, with success.

By the end of the first week, students should be writing quick, small, persuasive pieces that state an idea about a text and elaborate on that idea with evidence from the text they are reading. (This will also provide extra reinforcement of the kind of thinking students will need to do to answer the multiple choice questions on the ELA. It will also help them prepare them for the short responses of the ELA, where they listen to a narrative and then answer questions, often ones about character's behaviors, feelings, motivations and accomplishments.) By the end of the week they should expect to write in paragraphs that are clearly indented. Instruct students who have messy or small handwriting to skip a line between paragraphs. They should expect to create a thesis from the prompt and prove it by quoting or paraphrasing the text.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

The following week, the next revision you'll want to teach the students is how to extend their introductions. In their introduction they can, state the thesis, but also mention the genre of the text and the author. "In this short story, *Fly Away Home*, by Eve Bunting, Andrew is clever." They can also revise for literary language. "In the thought provoking story, *Fly Away Home*, by Eve Bunting, Andrew is remarkably clever." Then show students how to plan for the evidence they will use, and to mention this evidence in the introduction; "For instance, Andrew is clever because he is able to hide in plain sight. He is also clever because he finds a way to earn money to help his dad. Finally, he is clever because he sees hope in a time that seems hopeless." You may have the students go back to the essays they wrote the week before and write introductions for them that are three to four sentences.

Then show the students what can go in the conclusion. The conclusion, for very emergent writers, is merely a restating of the thesis. They can add to this basic conclusion by stating what they have proven the thesis, as in: "Thus, it's clear that Andrew is clever." It's not that hard for emergent writers, in the conclusion, to state something they liked about the text or that they learned from the text: "I'd like to be clever like Andrew." Another possibility for the conclusion is to teach students that it is an appropriate place to make a connection outside the text. Three possibilities are to connect this text to another text, to connect it to the world or a social issue, or to connect it to the writer. These would sound like, "This story reminds me of *Dancing in the Wings* because..." or "Finding hope when things seem hopeless is important to us all. Andrew shows us that even in the worst of times we can find a ray of hope," or "I wish I could be as clever as Andrew. He also makes me think about how I can help others find hope when they are having a difficult problem."

You may have your students go back to the same essays and write conclusions for them with what they have learned. By the end of the week, try a fresh on-demand essay on a familiar text, with a chart up in the room reminding them of the structures and transitions they have learned. Have them revise it on the second day. Do small group work as needed for text evidence, for intros and conclusions, for transitions. The transitions are listed above – these are crucial, do large and small group work around them and have them up all the time until the test.

The third week you will want to work on two things. First, make sure students elaborate their supporting paragraphs by starting with a transition phrase. They should clearly state the evidence they are giving, quoting or paraphrasing the text. Show them how to end the paragraph by going back to the thesis. Secondly, show them how to write about two texts at the same time if you haven't yet started this. Make it easy to start by using familiar texts where the connection is obvious. So, for instance, read the story *Fly Away Home* about homelessness and an article about how families cope with homelessness. Use the kinds of prompts that arise on the state test, such as, "If Andrew was to read this article..." or "Explain how families cope with homelessness. Use evidence from the story and the article..." By the end of the week, it would be good if students had written

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

an essay about two texts in one period and revised it in a second period. One of the texts should be one they already wrote about when they did an essay on just one text.

If you have five weeks, you can repeat this third week, writing another two essays and then perhaps publishing one essay from the past two weeks. If you have four weeks, move ahead to what's listed below for week four. Watch your timing – if you stay too long on one essay, there won't be time to teach students how to write across two essays. The kids need to write and revise, write and revise. They need charts of transition phrases and sentence starters, and charts of vocabulary commonly used in these kinds of essays. They need to write. They need to be successful. They should be proud of themselves as they do this. They should have the tasks down pat; they should know they're good at this. The only unpredictable challenge they'll face on the test will be the difficulty of the texts, because the rest of the challenges are ones you'll have prepared them for. Try to solve problems with small group work, not large group instruction—too often we slow down a whole class because some students are struggling with something.

Differentiated instruction is the key! Take small groups in grammar. Figure out who needs to write in simple sentences and who can make a sentence with a list separated by commas in their introduction. Take small groups in craft and structure. Figure out who needs basic transition words and who is ready for some of the more sophisticated ones. Figure out who needs a two sentence introduction and who can write five sentences. Pay attention to who wanders and gets off task and teach them NOT to make connections but to stay totally centered in the text.

This leaves you one week, at least, to teach students to try to incorporate their revisions earlier in their drafting process. You will also need to show them how to fulfill the task when the prompt is a little vague and/or the texts are a little harder. Show them some of the texts and prompts from prior years. Have them do a “boxes and bullets” outline, with a partner or in a small group for more struggling readers, and have them underline the parts of the text they may use. Practice writing an introduction for one of these essays. In small groups, show them how to quote the text, even if they're not sure they understand the whole text. Show them how to use some details from the text, by underlining some of the texts as they read or using notes if they kept them during the read aloud. Work on the first and last sentences of their paragraphs, so they go from “for example...” to “this shows...” Take down the charts and have them practice, with a partner if needed, revising their essays when the charts are not up. Then praise them, tell them to get some sleep, pat everyone—including yourself—on the back, and take the test. On the day of the test, don't wish them “good luck.” Tell them, “Do your best, you know how to do this.”

Note-taking for the Listening Response

One of the things that have stimulated much debate has been whether kids should take notes on the listening response. It's pretty clear that struggling readers often stop listening to the text as they try to write stuff down. Moreover, in comparing their note pages to

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

their essays, often little to nothing of what is in their notes turns up in their response. In the reading curriculum calendar, we outline a curriculum of read aloud that gets student's ready to listen for commonly asked elements of the text. You should, at the very least, practice teaching students to listen well, and see who benefits from taking notes. There will always be some fluent readers and writers who take good notes, use them, and all is well. There will always be some for whom note-taking is getting in the way. For a student of any age, for instance, who reads and writes at a third grade level, it's doubtful whether taking notes is going to be beneficial. As always, students need differentiation.

Therefore, you have two choices. You can offer differentiated instruction and coaching based on your assessment and your students' self assessments of their reading and writing, so that some students may take (some) notes while others don't. Or, figure out a system that benefits most of your students and hope for the best. Last year several TC classrooms emphasized listening rather than taking notes, and many students seemed much more prepared to write well, because they only have to remember the text for about 20 minutes. Some classrooms tried a system of jotting only the big "who" and "what" the first time, and some details or sequence of events the second time. Again, students who write quickly and can listen and write at the same time seemed to do well with this system, and struggling students struggled to listen, write, and comprehend. Note-taking doesn't raise the level of a students' reading comprehension. So you may want to assess and help students plan manageable goals so they do as well as possible.

If There's Trouble, Get Ready Early

If some of your students are having trouble backing up ideas about texts, take them back to a story they have understood, and return to familiar ideas. You'll want to notice this, if possible, when kids are doing post-its and small writing about texts. It will be late if you're noticing it for the first time during test prep. If you notice it early, then you may carefully plan your read aloud to model what readers are noticing and thinking about as they read, and then introduce stop-and-jot, turn-and-talk, and think aloud prompts that lead students to the kinds of inference and interpretation work that will set them up to write ideas supported with evidence. You may say something like, "I notice that the little girl in *Stray* seems to really want a dog but she can't tell her parents why. Stop and jot about what you think she's feeling and why..."

Next, in writing workshop, have your students take an idea that they thought was worth exploring. For example, the idea might be: "In *Stray*, Doris is lonely." They should start to write entries in their notebooks about what they were thinking and why it is important. They may start with the simple format of "I notice..." and "I think..." as in: "I notice Doris wants a dog," and "I think that she is really lonely in her home." You can then teach them to write brief summaries of the parts of the story that go with their idea, such as: "I notice Doris doesn't have anyone to talk to and she seems lonely. For example, in the story she can't explain to her parents why she wants the dog; she just brings it in the house. She doesn't seem used to explaining her feelings." Then you may teach them to write their thoughts about why characters do the things they do, *based on the story* as in:

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

“Doris probably hopes the dog will be a friend for her. That’s probably why she calls him in from the snow. In other parts of the story, she seems really lonely. She cries herself to sleep, she sits alone in a chair, and she never says what she wants. She needs a friend. The dog seems alone, too, so he’d be a good friend to Doris.”

If you do notice students lagging behind in this work late, work with easy stories and get these students used to writing down ideas and evidence in full sentences. Go with just two pieces of evidence—three will probably be too much. Go with simple ideas. Work on structure, and move from writing it all in one paragraph, to having an introduction even if it is one sentence, and then two supporting paragraphs even if they are short. Then show them how to say, after they give an example from the text, “This shows....”

Answering Free Response Questions

In this brief, one week seminar, you may teach your students to apply what they already know about making and supporting claims to the challenge of writing short responses to questions such as those they’ll find on the ELA test. Students can return to the collection of short texts they used when preparing for the ELA, and use these to answer short response questions. For example, students might be asked to write a response to the question, “Why did Doris want to keep the dog?” Teach students to answer the question with a claim, and then show them that they need to find evidence in the text to support their claim. Teach them to recall parts of the text in sequence, as this is also good practice for the ELA.

You may also want to teach students about rereading their answers using a series of lenses. For example, you might teach students to reread by thinking about whether or not the evidence they’ve chosen actually matches their claim. You may also teach them to reread using the eyes of an editor. You may teach them to do this by having them asking themselves, “Are my ideas expressed in sentences that are clear and easy for my reader to follow? Can I check the spelling of particular words by checking another part of the text where that word is in print?” Spend time reminding students to reread their writing so that they can develop these habits for the test.

Editing

The seventh grade ELA test includes a small section that assesses students’ editing ability by providing them with a short text that they will need to proofread. To support students with this task, you may want to create a writing seminar that begins by teaching them to edit their own writing using the lens of one grammatical convention at a time, so that they first reread their writing with the lens of capitalization for instance. We then teach them to reread with another lens. Some of the possible lenses to reread with include: Capitalization – proper nouns, titles, acronyms; Punctuation – quotation marks (titles and dialogue), commas (dialogue, lists, introductory phrases, compound sentences), apostrophes (possessives, contractions); Sentence Structure – coordinating conjunctions and compound sentences; Verbs – subject/verb agreement, tense; Pronouns – number agreement; Adjectives – usage of superlatives. These conventions will be assessed on

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

the ELA. After they have learned to read their own pieces with these lenses, you can teach them to do the same work with a piece of writing that is not theirs. You may want to begin by limiting the variety of errors in a text so that students become tuned in to the types of problems they might encounter. Then, by the end of the week, you might give them a text with a variety of editing work that they need to do. For example, you could provide students with sample paragraphs that highlight either capitalization errors or misuse of commas and ask them to proofread and correct the mistakes they find.

Independent Publishing

If you can muster up the energy, and you have planned ahead so you are not cramming this unit into three weeks, you may be able to institute small, informal independent publishing during this time, so that students maintain their independent writing lives. Although frankly, a lot of students who had clear, focused instruction, became very proud of their essay writing during this unit. Still, they are only doing a little writing about their own ideas and the choice of text and the prompts is generally given to them. It would be lovely if they could keep up their notebooks (remember how in unit one we taught them to do narrative entries of small moments, for the rest of the year?) with some small moments, and publish any of these, either as a small moment, or, really, any genre.

We know that volume and choice in writing is necessary for our students' growth, and yet during this time of year, many of us find our students' writing notebooks languishing, unopened in their desks. You might decide that now is a good time to spend some time, here and there, teaching your students how to dream up their own writing projects. They can work on their projects when they have free time in the school day, and continue to work on at home.

Open the floor up to students' suggestions. Some teachers limit their students' project ideas to the ones the class has studied so far: personal narrative, essay, persuasive writing. Other teachers decide that students can choose from any genre, as long as mentor texts support the students' choice. You shouldn't feel as if you need to dedicate a huge amount of time to independent projects. Merely suggesting that students give it a try, giving them time to brainstorm ideas, perhaps offering them a place in the classroom to display their finished work, can be all some classes need to be inspired to keep the volume of purposeful writing up and going.

If you opted to have students begin to develop independent projects during this unit, you will find that the need for interdependence will be at an all time high. You will want to teach students how to be sounding boards for each other's writing ideas. This will mean helping each other to see the positives, as well as the areas where things might need to be refined. You might also find that partners can serve as an invaluable accountability source. No one keeps a student on track quite like another student.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Reflecting on Test Prep

Ironically, many students say that they enjoyed the ‘test prep’ unit in reading and in writing workshop, and it’s interesting to speculate why. Part of it could be that they like the clear tasks and accountability – it’s easier for someone to tell a writer what to do than for a writer to plan and create independently. But it seems that a lot of students also like the intensity and clarity of workshop during these days. They write a lot. They write every day. The revision strategies they are given are clear and they are asked to apply them immediately. You might, therefore, reflect a bit on your workshop as you finish this unit, and think about how to bring that same sense of clarity and urgency to the rest of the year, so that almost every day, in workshop, students are writing a few pages and/or making immediate revisions. The fiction unit and the journalism units, ahead, particularly strengthen some of these areas.

Word Study to Support Writing Workshop For Struggling Writers

By now you’ve emphasized trying your best and moving on, as well as using word analogies and the word wall to spell tricky or unfamiliar words. This month you’ll want to give kids some specific strategies for editing carefully using the whole repertoire of strategies that you have taught them by now. The checklist you create for editing could have a little section just for spelling. Rather than one bullet that just says “Check spelling” you might break it down into more specific items to check for such as “Check for word wall words,” “Check for all the spelling patterns you know using the charts around the room” “Give tricky words your best try and move on” and a new strategy, “Look at one word at a time for spelling.” Then demonstrate how to use the checklist, one item at a time, rereading the piece over and over again for each new item. Compliment students who do this work carefully, and continue to encourage kids to give words their best try, rather than spelling words for them or making corrections to their work. Correcting their work for them at any point will only discourage them from giving their writing their own best attempt at using all the strategies they are capable of for spelling hard words. Even at this time of the year, with the ELA approaching, it is important to coach kids to doing their best work, by themselves. After all, that is what they will need to do on the test. They are best served by practicing strategies that they can use on their own, any time.

Unit Five – Writing Fiction, Historic Fiction, Fantasy or Mystery (And Making Reading-Writing Connections)

*Mid-
January /
February*

Your students have now written narrative at several points across their year, including personal narratives to start the year and then realistic fiction. It benefits writers enormously to have an opportunity to return to a genre, working once again in that genre only this time with greater control, using strategies learned earlier with greater finesse. When writers work more than once in a genre, they can progress from doing as they’re told towards using all they know to accomplish their own big goals. Mel Levine speaks about how students so rarely get to be good at something; they are constantly moved

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

from one task to a new one, just as they begin to achieve success. It's good for writers to have the opportunity to become skillful and independent.

This unit also offers a nice parallel to the reading unit at this time, where students are in class-wide genre studies in book clubs. For this round of fiction, you will teach your students to write the same kind of fiction that they are reading in their book clubs. By partnering this writing unit with the same genre in their reading work, we can provide students many opportunities to carry strengths from one discipline to another. For example, in their book clubs, students will be talking about important moments in their stories, moments that are windows into characters, moments of choice and change, moments when characters bump into social issues, historical conflicts, magical forces, or clues depending on the kinds of stories they are reading. The mind work of interpretation in book clubs is clearly tied to the work of putting forth a central meaning, not just retelling events, in writing. Then too, readers will notice moments when they have strong emotional responses to their books. During writing, they can create their own such moments. Of course this will mean that writers need to read with the eyes of insiders, attending to not only being moved, but also the craft moves the writer utilized in order to affect them.

Trust that your students will make discoveries from their own reading. Some of them may be better at talking about fantasy or mystery than we are! Fantasy readers will notice how the authors of their books control time and they can then think about manipulating time in their own drafts through foreshadowing, flashbacks, and dream sequences. Mystery readers might be bubbling with excitement over the new clue that was just revealed in their text and they can think about withholding or revealing clues in their own mysteries. No matter the genre, we will be deepening the fiction work we began in October.

Teach Students to Build On What They Know As Readers and Writers:
Lessons That Are Key to Any Genre

You will no doubt first want to look through this section, which builds upon the work of your first narrative units, earlier in the year, and list out the teaching points and unit bends that match and build on the strengths of your students. Then you will want to spend some time carefully reading the options below, adding to your plan the points that will help your students craft within that specific genre.

One of the most exciting aspects of this unit is that our reading and writing units will perfectly align. Whichever genre our students are reading and discussing in their book clubs during reading workshop will be the same genre they are writing. It is also important to note that although the genre makes the unit feel fresh and engaging to our students, as teachers we know that at the heart of this unit is the reinforcement of skillful narrative writing. Some lessons and methods for teaching the craft of story writing will be common to all the genres. You may want to look at where your students' writing falls on the narrative writing continuum and think about how independent they are in their use

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

of the writing cycle to decide which of the following reminders you need to spend more time on, no matter which subgenre of fiction your students are practicing.

To remind your young writers that they know a lot about stories based on their reading lives, you could set up partnerships or small groups to do a quick inquiry in which they chart qualities of fiction stories that they have enjoyed. They will no doubt list traits such as how the characters are likeable, have strong emotions and interesting relationships. Depending on what you've taught them to notice and talk about in the books they are reading and how often they've had opportunities for talk they might also say how sometimes characters are complicated, face tough problems, desire things and sometimes teach us lessons. They'll sometimes mention that writers use dialogue, detail, and inner thinking and that they give details about place, people, and objects. Next, teach your students to look across this chart of writer's craft, and decide which of those they want to tackle this time as they write fiction. Don't let them choose too many. They should choose a couple they already do, and add one or two they'll focus on in this story. This way, you are teaching your writers to set writing goals, and to imagine outgrowing themselves as writers.

You may also remind students of what they've already learned in fiction writing. You might repost fiction charts from October in your classroom and invite students to look once again at their first published realistic fiction piece. You want to set your writers up so that their notebook work and first drafts will be of the same quality as their more revised work from earlier projects. Partners can review their writing process from writing fiction and make a quick plan about how this unit will progress for them. They might jot down how they started by developing a main character, particularly by describing what that character wants and struggles with. They might recall they had multiple tries at creating timelines for their stories or told them in many ways across mini-books and began writing some of those scenes or moments that took place within a clear setting. They will remember how they used their notebook to develop their character and to reflect on the issues their character faced. They may have rehearsed their stories by telling them to a partner or through dramatic storytelling with a small group.

You may also teach students to use their notebook and any charts in the room to come up with ideas for writing. In their notebooks are probably a lot of small personal moments. You can remind them that in fiction they can change the endings of these moments, or use characters and issues they have real experience with, in their fiction stories. So they can look through their notebooks for possible ideas. Even in fantasy, mystery, and historical fiction, the characters need to be interesting, and have visible relationships, desires, and struggles. Otherwise you end up with too much attention to the trappings of the genre, such as a historical or fantastical setting, and characters that aren't compelling enough. By taking students on this walk through past learning you are not only gently reviewing important teaching, but you are also adding to their budding feelings of

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

confidence. “This may be a new genre for you,” you’ll say to your students, “but you already know so much about writing fiction.”

As in October, our writers will no doubt be so enthralled with the idea of writing fiction—especially writing the genres of fiction they are reading—that they will immediately begin to write long and complex plots. You will no doubt want to bottle this excitement, and remind them of how their thoughtful, paced work during the first unit led them to uncover things they never expected. Remind students that they will be writing short stories, and that their stories need to begin and end within a short time frame, to have one central problem that needs to be solved and to involve just two or perhaps three compelling characters.

Teach students they can rehearse ideas for their stories in their notebooks by writing some scenes and then trying them again in multiple ways. All through the unit, you will use your own writing to model how you rehearse, experiment and revise your ideas. Show how you use what you know about good storytelling to try to create a vivid setting, a character the reader knows intimately, and a problem we care about. Don’t feel you have to be fantastic at the particular genre though, as students benefit from seeing their teacher learn and get better as a writer as well. This often gives them more confidence in taking on new writing tasks. While demonstrating your own writing during a minilesson you might say, “You know, my first attempts at writing fantasy, have been really tough, but I am learning a lot as a writer, like I discovered that if I try out the same scene in multiple ways I almost always find the perfect one.”

Next, you may find it helpful to teach or review with students how to tell their story across a mini-book or storyboard before they draft out of their notebook. You may, for instance, start with 3 scenes, one where the characters are introduced, one where the problem becomes visible, and one where it is solved. That makes the story manageable, and they can draft those scenes or moments first. Naturally, some of these will develop into more than one moment. If you teach your students that each of these scenes needs a convincing setting, that there is a balance of dialogue, action, and inner thinking, so we can see both what the character does as well as feels, they’ll make a good start on their stories and their drafts will develop story tension and strong characters right from the start.

Once your students have begun drafting, you can start teaching revision. Revision lessons could include going back to the first scene and introducing hints about the problem characters will face by showing some of what they want, or what may get in the way. You might demonstrate by saying, “In my piece I want to start building tension right from the start, so I’m going to go back and show what she is thinking as she watches all the other kids crowding around. Maybe she can think something like, ‘I have to do something about this, I can’t just do nothing! But who would listen to me?’ or maybe...” You can also teach students to revise the first scene to develop relationships more – showing who has power, for instance. Or they could revise to give more details

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

about time or place in every scene, and how that changes. In the scene where the problem arises, you could teach them to revise to really elaborate how their character responds to trouble. Or to focus on vivid imagery, so that readers will see pictures as they read and remember them when they finish the story. Finally, students could revise by looking at mentor text and saying: ‘What’s a part I like and why? What specifically did the author do that I could do too? Where could I try that in my piece?’

Fiction writing is also a great place to teach conventions. One of the things you can teach students is to pay attention to tense. You can, using your own writing as a model, try the first scene of your story in past tense versus present, and notice how the tone is different. Then show them how once you commit to a tense, you have to make your verb endings match this tense. You may choose to teach your students some of the most common irregular verbs, the ones that turn up a lot in their writing, such as say/said, go/went, are/were, bring/brought, etc.

You could teach your writers how to use short or long sentences to have a rapid, intense tone, or a more contemplative tone, and then you could show them how to punctuate some of those longer sentences. Teaching students first how to use commas in lists, “*In her bag she had a comb, a mirror, and a green stone.*” and then how to elaborate those lists by describing the objects, “*In her bag she had a golden comb that had belonged to Princess Stargiver, a mirror that showed the future, and a green stone that made you invisible,*” will show them how to expand their powers at the sentence level.

Writing Historical Fiction

One option for this unit is to undertake a whole class study in reading and writing Historical Fiction. When choosing this option you will no doubt first want to look through the general fiction teaching described above, which builds upon the work of your first narrative units, earlier in the year. From that section you might then list out the teaching points and unit bends that build on the strengths of your students. Then you will want to spend some time carefully reading this section, adding to your plan the points that will help your students craft within this specific genre.

There are some aspects of historical fiction that involve some special tasks. First, it is essential that the writer know something about the historical period in which his or her story will be set. The first stage of collecting for historical fiction will therefore involve collecting around the historical time period. One way to do this is to align your social studies instruction with your historical fiction writing and reading work. For example, in social studies, your students might be learning about the Civil War through discussions, trips, film clips, and primary documents—all the while collecting jottings about what they are learning about the period, spending time talking in partnerships and clubs, and creating whole class word walls and charts gathering your current understandings. Simultaneously, in reading workshop while your students are reading historical fiction of *various* time periods, you will be careful to highlight Read Alouds and club books

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

specifically set within the Civil War, again collecting both individual and whole class jottings about your new knowledge of the time period.

Other teachers might prefer to delve into the non-fiction work only in reading workshop. If this is the case, you will want your students reading not only Historical Fiction, but also nonfiction during this unit. For some classes your study might begin with all clubs reading within the same time period, for others you might have one time period that you model from in Read Alouds and Minilessons and then teach clubs how to create their own charts, word walls, and have conversations about their learning within their own time period. You will want to make sure clubs are keeping careful records in their reading logs or in some other place of the texts they are reading and learning from, so they are able to access them as both mentor texts and “fact checkers” as they write their Historical Fiction.

As your students develop a deeper knowledge of the time period they will be writing in, they will learn even more as they move through the writing process. Remind students that they already know a few ways to gather ideas for fiction stories – beginning with plot, character or setting. Show them how to apply what they are learning about their time to their repertoire of strategies for generating ideas by asking themselves, “Does this make sense for the time period? Does it ring true?” For example, a student getting started by collecting plot ideas might have listed, “a story about a boy in the Civil War who wants to spend time with his older brother but he is working all the time, so they drive together to Florida on vacation.” She will ask herself if it makes sense for the period and if it rings true and then revise that point on his list to be something more like “a story about a boy in the Civil War who wants to spend time with his older brother but their family is divided and he is on the Confederate side, so...” using these questions from the very beginning for everything from naming the character a time-appropriate name to the sorts of period-based motivations a character might have will help the writer get lost in the world of the story, as well as help off-set the number of fact-based revisions that will occur later in the process.

While continuing to collect and rehearsing the student might write small moments involving her main character. She might decide she wants her character to visit a friend, you will teach her to ask herself, “How would a person like my character go someplace in this time period? Would he be alone? Would he walk? Ride in a carriage? On a horse? A steam engine? What would he wear? What would he eat?” You will teach her to go back to her jottings and find the answers to those questions and add them into her writing, or to go back to nonfiction she found informative and seek out those answers.

Once your students have explored characters and plots and they have an idea for a story, you might consider having the students try a ‘flash-draft’ of a single everyday scene in their notebooks. As the students experiment with trying their characters having supper or getting dressed in the morning, we can assess what lessons we might want to teach in drafting and revising. We can also teach students how to search for additional historical

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

information, showing them how to look for details that matter in everyday life, such as types of transportation, clothing, or food. You will want them to look closely at how these historical details are sprinkled throughout their historical fiction books in order to help a reader envision the world of the story. Then, you might model how from nonfiction texts and primary documents you gather more historical details such as every day objects, modes of transportation, common locations, dress, and language. You can make sketches of artifacts and some entries in their notebook about objects or ways of life, and show them how you incorporate these into your notebook entries for your story. If your students are studying immigration, take them to the Tenement Museum and have them write entries there, as imagined journal entries, or in the voice of their character. If your students are writing about the American Revolution, take them to the period rooms at the Metropolitan or Brooklyn museum or your local museum. Or pull those visuals from the websites and show them the displays.

Next, when writing historical fiction, it's usually helpful to make a double timeline, as in, one timeline that shows the historical struggle, and one that shows the personal struggle your character will encounter. Some historical fiction begins with the historical struggle, and some begins with personal tensions. For instance, in *Nettie's Trip South*, the reader meets the main character and learns about the historical struggle right away. In *Freedom Summer* we learn first about the two main characters and their friendship, before finding out about the historical context that makes their relationship so daring.

Meanwhile, as your book clubs develop theories about their characters in reading, you might teach them to distinguish and discuss what influences the main character's struggles across their book. Explain that in some historical fiction, the big problem a character faces is, in fact, the historical struggle, such as slavery in *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*, or enlistment in the army in *My Brother Sam is Dead*, or an arranged marriage in *...Bird*. In others, the struggle is a more personal one (as in *Sarah Plain and Tall*), such as learning to love someone, or adjusting to a family change, or standing up to a bully, and the historical setting is really a backdrop. You might even do some shared writing where you and your students imagine how the story you are modeling with might go if you did it each way.

Once students begin drafting, there are some craft moves that are particular to historical fiction that you may want to consider. For example, teach your students that historical fiction writers really need to set the scene with careful detail in the first moment. They need to let the reader know, through the details they include, when and where this story takes place. Invite clubs to reread their historical fiction mentor texts and carefully envision the setting from just the first scene. Show your students how to unpack what the author has done and apply those same strategies in their own writing. Expect to model this in your own story – thus, plan to not load your first draft with detail, show your students how to add it in, as they will predictably need to do this too. It will also be predictable that your students will need to revise again for historical consistency or accuracy, so make your draft need this too – you might say, “oops, in my story Polly

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

wrote a letter that only took two days to arrive! But this book I read about the colonies said that everything took days and days to travel from state to state, I'll have to change that detail in my story." Or how you realized you didn't know what kind of tool your character would even use to write with, and you went back to some of your resources, or that you needed to check what he or she would be wearing for different occasions.

Teach your students to use the visuals in their social studies books, and the pictures from museum websites, and the good descriptions from their historical fiction. You may teach students, as a whole class or in small groups, to craft their characters' dialogue carefully, to have them speak in the dialect and with the vocabulary not just for the time period, but for the character's background and status. Primary documents like diaries and film clips, historical fiction mentors and even fiction that was contemporary for the time period, are all excellent sources for this work.

Sometimes in writing historical fiction, young writers tend towards the melodramatic. Characters tend to get killed off in epic battles, or to suffer horrific injuries, or to rise up like superheroes to defeat irresistible odds. You can decide whether to let them wallow in melodrama (they are, after all, student writers), or to teach them to revise for believability. A good place to practice this revision is in the scene where the main character faces a crisis, choice, or problem. This is where you can teach them to make their character believable, flawed, or complicated, by basing their character on people they know or their own observations and self-reflections. For your stronger writers, you can teach them to show that their character is complicated and changeable, and perhaps they can even show their character learning to be different across scenes – you can model this in your story.

Through the entire drafting and revision process, return again and again to the students' book clubs, which you will have probably noticed have fast become the students' writing response groups as well. Encourage students to bring their drafts to book club discussions! Students can trade drafts, and just as they would in book clubs, place post-its on each other's writing with their predictions, inferences and interpretations. The club can then discuss the texts as readers – giving the writer a window into what readers are truly taking away from their drafts!

Finally, you can teach your students that historical fiction stories can end without having to resolve the historical struggle. As students tend to critique how satisfying the ending was at the completion of their book club books, you can teach them to consider if their own storylines were tied up or not and how to leave the ending satisfying, while still historically accurate. This is a time, once again, to be wary of the Superman-type endings. It is very unlikely that any one of our students can give their characters full credit for ending the Civil War, giving women to the right to vote, or landing a man on the moon! So watch out for those sorts of endings. We might coach a student who is considering an ending like this, "so maybe in the end Jason can be so worried about his brother that he tells Abraham Lincoln that he needs to free the slaves..." and we might

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

suggest, just as in your first unit, that he instead consider something the character discovers about himself or about his brother that was hiding there all along. He might try out something like, “maybe Jason learns that while he cannot change his brother, Jason will still always remember his brother as the one who believed in him. Or *maybe...*” Historical fiction often has more of a sense of being unsettled or lacking resolution than other fictions, perhaps because it so closely resembles the unsettledness of true historical events. Often these stories, such as *Number the Stars* or *Rose Blanche*, are about bearing witness. In the story you write, you can show your students how, as you think hard about revising your final scene, you can decide whether your story will be one that celebrates overcoming adversity, or that bears witness to suffering.

Writing Fantasy

Another option for this unit is to organize a whole class study in reading and writing Fantasy. Again, when choosing this option you will no doubt first want to look through the first “Lessons That Are Key to Any Genre” section of this write-up, which builds upon the work of your first narrative units, earlier in the year. From that section you might then list out the teaching points and unit bends that match and build on the strengths of your students. Then you will want to spend some time carefully reading this section, adding to your plan the points that will help your students craft within this specific genre.

Many fantasy writers are often obsessive, and they develop, at an early age, a lot of expertise in how fantasy goes – because a lot of fantasy does follow patterns. Your own writers will need to be reading fantasy in their book clubs during this unit in order to make those connections. Many of them will know fantasy through film as well as their reading lives, through *Harry Potter* and *Narnia*. In reading workshop, you might encourage clubs to do an inquiry across texts, noticing the patterns that seem to be predictable within the fantasy genre. They might notice how one such structure is the kind of fantasy in which it starts in the real world and then the characters are transported to a magical one (as in *Narnia* or *Harry Potter* or *Droon*). Another kind of fantasy is one that creates, right from the start, an alternate reality, often one which has a kind of medieval quality to it, with castles, monarchies, pageantry, chivalry, dragons, and legends (such as *Deltora Quest*, *Wizard of Earthsea*, *Dragon Slayer Academy*).

You can model choosing between these two structures as a way to get started. You will either be modeling a mythical, medieval world, or one that starts in the real world and the characters get transported. Either way, you can teach students, in their collecting stage, to write entries in which they play with describing this place, including details about the setting and the inhabitants. Teach them to write with a lot of detail so the reader can really envision the place and the creatures. For stronger writers, you can also show them how fantasy usually creates a place in which some characters have more power than others. In *Narnia*, for instance, Aslan and the White Witch are more powerful than the others. Stronger writers may also be able to hint at the legends of this place, which you could show them in your own writing, as in ‘there was a legend told in the village that

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

some day a boy would come, from another world, and he would bring with him a savage dog and a golden key.”

Be cautious however of getting too caught up in the dizzying freedom to create any world they want. As students know from previous narrative units, plot and characters also play important roles in strong storytelling. Remind students of what they know from their work as readers of fantasy: heroes are flawed; villains have motivations; and characters tend to go on quests that end happily.

The biggest challenge for fantasy writers is to keep the time period of their story tight, otherwise they will tend to summarize when their stories spread over too much time. It can be helpful to teach your writers that when fantasy writers are telling short stories, they tend to have them happen within a day or two, and often the story is a short quest that is given to the main character at the start, and that ends just a day or two later when the character has conquered one or two challenges. You may want to rehearse a story with them, such as one where you imagine a character opening up a school locker or cubby and inside is a magical creature who tells the main character of a quest, such as getting a golden book or key from the basement of the school, or baking a secret recipe in the ovens of the cafeteria, or rescuing an imprisoned student-fairy from the closet in the principal’s office which is guarded at night by a werewolf. The main thing is, the quest has to be definitive, there have to be one or two clear challenges for the character to overcome, and it has to be over after that!

Additionally, one of the hallmarks of fantasy is the writer’s ability to suspend his reader’s disbelief. How else to explain otherwise world-savvy readers suddenly holding their breaths as the princess scales the mountaintop while chasing the unicorn? Fantasy writers make us believe, while we are held entranced by the spell of the story, that the events described are real – or at least real in *that* world. We can teach students how they can accomplish those same effects by first studying short mentor fantasy texts (picture books such as *Merlin and the Dragons* and *The Paperbag Princess* are great for this). We can then show yet another way that fantasy writers are quite thoughtful in their writing. Even if the entire story takes place in a fantastical world, the world still has rules that it follows. In our world there is gravity and science. People grow food or buy it from supermarkets. In a fantasy world there might be magic instead, but there is a logic to the magic – it follows rules that must be followed throughout the story. For example, if a character needs to say a special word to cast a spell then the character must always say the special word – not suddenly switch to a wand or have a fairy show up that the writer never mentioned before! When students realize that each fantastical element needs to be introduced fairly early in the story and then followed through until the end, they naturally begin to limit themselves to just a few important characters, creatures and magical elements.

You can do the same teaching listed above by teaching your students to rehearse their story with a partner, to develop their character and their settings in their notebook, and to

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

use mini-books or story mountains to envision the scenes of their story just as they might in any fiction piece. For fantasy, you can teach students to plot a few main scenes or moments, for example: one where we meet the characters and they discover their quest and/or other place, one where they face their first challenge, one where they face a second challenge and a final scene where they succeed in their quest (and perhaps return to their real world). In each scene, they'll need to give lots of details about the place, the daily life, the dress, and the magic of this place. They'll also have to develop one or two compelling characters. Within the fantasy structure, the reader has to admire or sympathize with a main character, so model for your students how you introduce a main character in the first scene who is likable because we get to know their traits and desires.

It may be interesting for your writers, in their book club conversations and their writing, to think about the roles characters play as archetypes, as in, a reluctant hero, a villain, a sidekick, and perhaps a mentor. Many students talk knowledgeably about *Harry Potter* this way, speaking of Snape as a possible villain or a reluctant hero. In their writing, it sometimes helps them develop characters in fantasy if they put them in these roles. You can teach stronger writers how characters may break out of these roles, by being complicated or surprising, you might demonstrate, "in the story we've been working on together, we decided that William would be really uncomfortable being the hero, but maybe in this part he could have a minute where he feels proud of having helped the little girl or maybe..." You can also teach them to pay attention to common elements of fantasy such as magical creatures and objects. Again, teach them to limit themselves to a few and try to describe these in detail.

Predictable revision lessons for fantasy include: teaching students to develop likable, interesting characters; teaching them to show characters' desires through their inner thinking or their dialogue; showing them how to develop small tensions with other characters. You can also teach students how to use flashbacks or dreams, which are common in fantasy, to give the history of a quest, an object, or a mythical beast. Teach students to rely on their clubs which can morph into a fantasy writing group to work on keeping their stories tight – helping them to imagine the story as one episode in this place's history. And, just as with the historical fiction pieces, you might encourage clubs to exchange drafts of their pieces to read as readers, complete with post-its marking where the reader had questions, was surprised or was envisioning the world the writer had created. These comments from their classmates, who just happen to be expert fantasy readers, will go a long way towards helping students to see the effect (or lack of) that different parts of their stories are having on readers. You could also teach them how to use details from films and history texts they've seen to capture castles, clothing, dragons, etc. Finally, you could teach them to consider their choices for endings. They could solve the quest, with the character returning to the real world after conquering the 'dragon.' Or they could end it as some fantasy does, where one small problem has been solved, but the big enemies are still undefeated – only to be dealt with another day.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Writing Mysteries

A final option for this unit is to plan a study in reading and writing Mystery. As with the other two options, when choosing to work on Mystery you will no doubt first want to look through the general fiction teaching described in the first “Lessons That Are Key To Any Genre” section of this write-up, which builds upon the work of your first narrative units, earlier in the year. From that section you might then list out the teaching points and unit bends that match and build on the strengths of your students. Then you will want to spend some time carefully reading this section, adding to your plan the points that will help your students craft within this specific genre.

When your writers set out to write mystery, they will bring to their writing the thinking they’re doing in their mystery book clubs. In reading, you will have taught them to notice how the author sets up the mystery in the first part of the story, then inserts clues, and then offers a clear solution by the end. In their clubs they will be reading closely, paying attention to how clues accumulate. They may talk about the role of the investigator, and the friends or sidekicks of the investigator, and of the victim. Some mysteries have a villain, other are more about mishaps and lost objects than about crimes.

One aspect of mysteries that is different from many other stories is that often, especially in students’ mysteries such as *Nate the Great*, the ‘crime’ or incident has already happened, and the first scene describes the investigator becoming acquainted with the crime. Then, often, the detective backtracks, trying to gather a history of the crime, and to unravel from clues he or she discovers, what really happened. Your writers can reproduce this structure. Teach them to rehearse their story in a few ways by explaining it to a partner. They can begin by first thinking of the crime or mishap that will be investigated. The students can then explain what really happened – the ‘truth of the matter.’ Then they can explain what characters in their story will think happened (as well as what they want their readers to think), and then they can imagine what clues their detective will find that will make things clear. Take a touchstone text, such as one of the *Nate the Great* stories, and unpack it this way, and then model on your own story. You could do a shared writing with the students, creating a crime, detective, and series of clues together.

Another aspect of mystery that is important to explore are the characters – in particular the crime-solver, the victim, suspects, and if appropriate, the culprit. Students might be so intent on their plots of their mysteries that they feel tempted to create cardboard characters. We need to remind students that they know quite a bit about creating believable characters with both internal and external characteristics and mysteries are no exception. Point out the many quirks of Cam Jansen or the fear that Sammy Keyes sometimes has. Remind students that every character (especially the suspect) needs to have motivations in order for the plot to not only make sense but to make their readers care.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

As with other fiction, it will be helpful to teach students to quickly tell their mystery in several ways through a mini-book or storyboard. On each page or frame they can quickly list the crime, the clues, and the resolution. Teach them to use their fiction craft to create a convincing setting, a compelling character, and clear action. For your stronger writers, you may demonstrate how a mystery can have other tension besides the central mystery. The tension might be between characters. For example, if the central mystery is that Jessica lost her backpack during lunch on Tuesday, Cristina may be helping her solve the case, but in the process, they may get into an argument over who knows more about their classmates. Or they could show how their main character grows and changes, as well as showing how he or she solves a mystery. The story may begin with Cristina feeling lonely, but by solving the case, she may realize that she can reach out to others. Stronger writers may also learn to introduce a false trail or red herring, so the reader as well as the detective is misled.

Again, the link between reading and writing work is strong while working in this genre. Students will know from their reading that mystery readers want a mystery they can actually figure out – not one where the writer pulls a punch and makes it impossible for the reader to have ever solved the mystery before the detective. Remind students that important clues must be sprinkled throughout the story, not just at the end. Encourage students to bring their drafts to their book clubs to be read and discussed as texts first, and then critiqued in ways that will help them be improved.

Predictable revision lessons for mystery include: teaching students to develop likable, interesting characters. Teach them to withhold evidence from the reader and perhaps even how to add a “clue” or two that turns out to not be a clue at all and throws the detective off a bit. Show them how the detective’s sidekick can have complementary traits, like the detective might be really good at seeing tiny details and the sidekick is good at noticing the big picture. You could also teach them how to use details from the mysteries they have read and the films and television shows they have seen to get a sense of the type of clues the detective might find. For stronger writers, you might teach them the enticing opportunities that mystery provides to create tension and suspense in stories. You can point out that they can quickly increase tension and raise the stakes in a story simply by adding a time-crunch for the crime to be solved, increasing the value of the missing object, making the characters unable to act, or simply increasing the danger or desire. Finally, you could teach all of your students to consider their choices for endings, how and where the missing object will be found or how the object’s owner will hear the news, or how the true culprit will be revealed.

Word Study to Support Writing Workshop

In each unit of study, we’ve added on one or two new pieces of work for students to consider as they edit their work for spelling. Across the year they’ve learned that giving words their best try and moving on is of utmost importance, as well as using spelling patterns they know from word study, and using the word wall to spell and learn commonly misspelled high frequency words. As the year goes on, you’ll probably want

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

to continue to encourage students to use what they learned in previous units throughout the next unit, right from the beginning. As you near the end of this month's unit, you might want to teach students that there are specific strategies they can use as partners to help each other edit their writing for spelling. For example, you might teach kids that instead of spelling the word for your partner, you can say several things instead, such as "See if you can use one of the spelling patterns from word study to spell that word" or "Do you know a word that sounds like that word? You can use it to spell this one." Kids can even remind each other to look at the entire word on the word wall, not just one letter at a time. During partner time, you can coach kids to use a chart in the room to remember some of the things they can say to each other instead of spelling the words for each other.

Unit Six – Journalism

March

Middle school students often respond well to writing that has 'real world' implications. In addition, writing that encourages purposeful observation of peers and the school community in place of self-reflection and emotional exposure can ignite excitement in students, particularly boys, in new ways. Writing that has to happen with speed, accuracy, and within the confines of a word count contributes to buy-in, as it contrasts with much of the writing students have done so far. Journalism taps right into these things, infusing writing with a sense of immediacy and relevance.

Teachers who taught this unit report to us with glee the remarkably high engagement of their students, as well as their productivity and increased focus as writers. The goal of this journalism unit is to teach students to write quickly, to revise purposefully and swiftly, and to write from positions of thoughtful observation within their community. You will teach your class first to write quick news reports, and then to learn some of the craft of investigative journalism, in which they often conduct interviews and collect observation notes. Typical news reports include: *Spider Gets Loose From Science Lab*, or *Excitement Over New Skateboarding Class*. Investigative pieces may sound like: *Spiders Get a Bum Rap at I.S.450*, or *New Skateboarding Class Reveals Need For Variety in Gym Classes*. In the news reports, students learn to write concise, focused reports that tell the who, what, where, and when with a sense of drama. In the investigative reports, students learn to ask questions, to ponder the meaning of everyday happenings, and to write to suggest significance.

Here's how the unit goes: It starts with a simulation that is enacted by one or two teachers. This simulation should be short and dramatic, with some kind of physical interaction as well as verbal, so that students can observe (they don't know it isn't real!), and then immediately try to record what they saw in a 'news report.' To do this, you may gather your students for a lesson, or at least tell them to have their notebooks out and open to a fresh page as you are going to be teaching them a lesson in a moment. Then,

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

without any other warning, go into your simulation or role-play. One teacher this year, for instance, became frightened when she ‘saw’ a rat that had escaped from the science lab. Another teacher had a colleague come in and announce that a snake had gotten loose and was last seen in this classroom. Still another had the principal come in, seize one of the book club books, declare that it was banned. All of these teachers used their bodies to show their fear, and they said things that were ‘quotable,’ as in “There’s a snake loose in the room...could it be poisonous!?” and “Give me that book, these students deserve to read freely!” Hokey, but it worked because the suddenness of the altercation hooks the kids right away. Clearly, use your common sense and don’t do anything that would instill bad feelings, fear, or anxiety. You just want a small, sudden, observable drama.

Then you tell your kids to open up their notebooks and they have five minutes to write down what they just witnessed. It’s very quick and intense. To scaffold your more struggling writers, you might say something like, “I, for instance, am thinking my news report could start *Today at 8:55 am, students in room 506 were startled to witness...*” If you use a journalistic tone, including 3rd person and a sense of specificity and drama, the kids usually pick that up right away. Then have the students share with a partner, and read aloud a bunch of them, telling them to listen for things other ‘journalists’ did that they liked. They’ll usually notice how some were dramatic, or had good detail, or sounded like a news report. This whole thing takes 2-3 minutes for the simulation, 5 minutes to write, 10 minutes to share with partners and then whole class. Then tell them to imagine that a newspaper is going to publish their report, but they may only be able to keep the first 25 words – and they should try to make that first 25 really count. Give them 5 minutes to revise just the first 25 words, telling them that probably they want to revise to be more: specific; detailed; and/or dramatic (write those on a chart under the heading ‘News Reports.’) They’ll get right to it, heads down, doing immediate revision. Have them share again with a partner and then at their tables, and share out lines they really like. It’s amazing how in one period they’ll learn to observe closely, write quickly, and immediately revise. Their second versions will be better, especially since they only have to work on the first part. They may add a title, which begins to teach them angle or perspective. Typical titles included: *Girls Jump on Desks, Boys Get Under to Find Snake; Reptile Seeks Freedom*, etc. You can see how the first is beginning to develop an angle. Finish your lesson by starting a word chart of technical and academic words that relate to news reporters, such as *witness, this reporter, incident, bystander, quoted...* You’ll keep adding to this list. A chart of vivid words and verbs also helps, and they’ll probably start with *shocked, bolted, surprised, dismayed, perplexed*.

That first day is intense and fast-paced, and you can see why your writers will be so engaged. The next day, explain to them how news-reporters pay close attention to the world around them. They note with care dramatic events, and also ordinary ones, and they imagine how they would sound as a news report. Reporters notice patterns, and also things that are unusual. Give your students small pads or notebooks that they can hold in their hands to take notes as they go around the school, looking for incidents. Explain that a lot of good stories happen in unsupervised spaces, such as the yard, the

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

cafeteria, sometimes the gym, the hallways. If you have writing workshop at a time when your students can visit these sites, take them with you, notes in hand, and have them come back and write a quick news report, not more than maybe 150 words long. Teach them to include the who, what, where, when. Explain that the why is usually reserved for investigative journalism, which they'll be doing soon, but first they are going to develop their muscles as news reporters. If you don't have workshop at a time when students can go looking for stories, then do another simulation, so they can practice capturing the who, what, where, and when, with a sense of specific detail, drama, and accuracy. You can also make 'journalists' passes' so they have permission to enter other spaces in the school.

Students usually collect and write three or four news reports over this first week. These reports are short. You can work on quick revision by teaching them to revise for detail, drama, and accuracy. You can also revise for technical and academic language. You may collect some news reports (the inner pages of the *Daily News*, *Post*, *NewsDay*, *Sports Illustrated for Kids* often have short readable examples) and the students can study them as touchstone texts, charting their qualities and trying some of their craft in their own pieces. Be careful not to give them editorials, feature articles, or investigative pieces, stick to short, local, current news. Meanwhile the students are reporting on happenings in their own community – they never have to leave the building to do this work. Often, they do start to carry their pads everywhere and see stories all the time. One student overheard two teachers whispering, whipped out his pad, and started writing “wedding dress doesn't fit, teacher upset!” They begin to truly live and think like writers during this time.

Keep up the pace. They can draft three news reports across three days (doing the observation at other times or with you for class trips to other classrooms, the gym, etc.). Then have them publish one in a quick publishing. Keep adding to your word charts, and return to your touchstone texts for lively language and phrases. Share student work immediately, so that your community of writers begins to shift in its language and attitudes – they will, the kids are intuitive and mimetic. One lesson you may give during this time that is very effective, is to demonstrate the difference between telling a story as a personal narrative or memoir, and telling it as a news report.

For instance, as a memoir, you might write:

It was cold and icy day on Monday and the classroom seemed a little empty, and cold also as I opened the door just before homeroom for kids to come in. I was thinking about the movie I had seen last night, *Jurassic Park*, and how scary the giant reptiles had been in it. We all filed in together and took our seats. Then something surprising happened. Mrs. Coello opened the door and whispered urgently, “A snake has gotten loose from the science lab. We don't know which one, and I'm afraid it could be dangerous. The custodian last saw it

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

here in your room.” My heart seemed to stop. I was afraid of snakes. After last night’s movie, I was terrified. Kids heard, and some of them jumped on their desks...

As a news report, you might write:

Students at I.S.450 were shocked this Monday morning to find that a snake had gotten loose in their classroom. Pandemonium erupted as they tried to find the scaly reptile. “I’m afraid it could be dangerous!” a young witness overheard her teacher say, causing almost everyone to leap onto their desks. One brave student crept down, claiming that he would capture this menacing creature. Like a young Indiana Jones, this student faced fears that made others weep...

The students will notice how the first is slower paced, descriptive, with full inner thinking. They’ll notice the use of ‘I’ and the perspective of the narrator which is fully developed. They’ll probably notice that the second sounds more dramatic, that it is third person, or no ‘I,’ and that it seems to tell the story from the outside. Mostly, they will immediately grasp the difference and be able to write another news report that sounds more ‘newsy.’ You could download a video clip if you want, anything from the famous eye-witness reporting of the Hindenburg to a NY1 clip or a sports clip from the night before. Help your students talk about the tone of the pieces, the role of the reporter, the audience, the rapidity with which information is conveyed, and any language they notice. Your classroom should be full of news reports students have written, charts where they have analyzed these and touchstone texts, and word charts.

By the end of the first part of the unit, thus, students will have analyzed a variety of news reports, drafted several and published at least one, and learned to observe, write, and revise quickly. Some teachers moved on then, to part two, which is investigative journalism. Others did the whole process again, which let students practice these skills with growing strength and independence.

The second part of the unit is investigative journalism in their own community/environment. These investigations usually stem from the news reports, as you teach them to consider the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of their reports – as in how did this happen and why does it matter. From the snake incident, for instance, you can demonstrate how an investigative piece might follow up with how snakes are cared for at I.S. 450. Or it might take the perspective of the snake, and find out how it might have been living over the weekend. Or it might follow the gendered reactions of the bystanders, investigating how boys versus girls reacted, or adults versus students. Or you could investigate why people are afraid of snakes, and where those fears come from. Show how there are a lot of different ‘angles,’ an investigative reporter could develop, depending on their particular interests and observations.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

The first step, then, is to consider some of the unanswered questions that arise from any of the news reports they have written (and they may decide to appropriate one that another student started but isn't choosing to use). Have lots of charts up with possible subjects and questions that students suggest, so students can share their ideas and broaden them. So, under two or three news reports, have them list unanswered questions. Next, teach them to list possible leads, (as in sources – experts, witnesses, bystanders). Have them do this work with a few reports, and then you can teach them to consider which questions would make interesting articles, and which leads they can actually follow up with. One student decided, for instance, to follow up on her observations about kids' holding hands in the lower grades, to find out when and how kids, especially boys, learned not to hold hands – which led her to a bigger investigation of boys and bullying. Another student investigated the life expectancy and care of the classroom spider. Another did a news report on kindergarteners crying in the lunch room, followed by an investigation into the 'atmosphere of yelling,' and who it bothered and who it didn't. Another observed the security guard sharing a book and did an investigative report on the secret readers in the building – which led to new adult book clubs! Reporters look closely at the overlooked – they see beauty and trouble in the world around them and they bring these to the attention of their readers.

Once students have decided on a tentative angle, they need to do some investigation through observation and/or interviews. Teach a simple interview protocol where you model that the reporter tries to: establish a rapport or connection; ask a few preliminary questions; listen carefully for interesting ideas; ask follow-up questions or say 'say more about that;' and tries to get examples. The student reporter who was following up on hand-holding, for instance, asked her source, Jack X, how he learned not to hold hands with boys. When he said he learned it in the playground, she asked for 'examples' of other things he learned in the playground, which led to her discovery of how boys policed other boy's behavior through teasing, mocking, and sometimes bullying. You might want to conduct some role-playing scenarios with the students so they can practice interviews. Coach them in their body language, their note-taking, and their listening skills. They may want to bring a partner with them when they interview, to help with note-taking. Work on a system for them to take fairly quick jottings, but if they want to quote, they need to get the exact words down.

Next, teach your students some of the craft of an investigative piece, which is longer and more substantial than a news report. First of all, it is more angled – it is suggestive, it is usually thinking about an idea or concern. Unlike a persuasive essay, though, the writer doesn't have to answer questions or have a totally clear stance, he or she can pose questions and be opening up investigations. Their narrative craft will serve them well, but here writers need to be concise and purposeful with their craft – if there is dialogue, for instance, it's usually in the form of a quotation. If there is setting, it's to create a vivid image. Some craft you can teach them includes: creating a vivid image that lets the reader picture a scene, through details and sparkling language; using an anecdote to get

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

the reader to care; using repetition to hook and persuade the reader; writing with a journalistic ‘tone’ that is powerful; and asking burning questions. Revision can include for: specific details about places, people, objects, and actions; concise word count; accuracy; and the kinds of leads and endings that appear in touchstone texts. You could also do a grammar lesson on verb tense, as many young writers shift tenses in the middle of investigative pieces.

Where students usually write a few news reports, they’ll probably only write one investigative piece. Some students may draft two and publish one, if they are conducting more than one investigation at a time. You can decide, then, where and how to publish. Some teachers published a newspaper by typing in the pieces (a lot of work, but lets you focus on some editing or word-processing techniques if you have the resources), others had an awards ceremony that mimicked the Pulitzer prize for journalism, where writers gather to support each other and their field as well as extraordinary accomplishment, and some used the building as a virtual newspaper, so students published their piece in the spot in the building where they thought it would be most relevant.

Unit Seven – Content Area Writing/Writing About Knowledge

April

Some of you may be surprised to see this unit instead of poetry. We wanted to offer a new unit this year and we do believe that students could be doing independent publishing of poetry throughout the year. There is one option for this unit around song and poetry.

In this unit you will rally students to write powerfully about knowledge. You’ll give them the tools to use writing process, including the study of mentor texts, in social studies and science writing, so that your students will be confident that they are able to write well about subjects they have studied. You’ll here find an answer to how to craft a unit of study that replaces the amorphous ‘research paper’ that sometimes haunts content classes, instead learning to look to some of the actual genres that researchers write in after they have done research or when they care deeply about a subject.

One of the most important aspects of this work will be teaching students to make choices about genre. We imagine that your students may rehearse and publish in a variety of genres, including content area essays, poetry and song, and literary nonfiction. With that goal in mind, the first bend in the road will be writing to think: reading and taking notes, accumulating information, and rehearsing ideas. The second bend in the road will be reading as a writer: studying mentor texts and rehearsing genre choices. The third bend in the road will be revision and publishing of some of their drafts. You’ll have to decide if your students will rehearse all these genres, in which case you’ll be teaching one at a time, leaning more heavily into the genres that may be newer to them, such as content essays. Of course, you may decide to focus the unit most strongly on one major genre, such as essays. We’ll describe the teaching for essay, poetry and song, and literary

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

nonfiction, as well as some mentor texts, and you'll have to make that important choice as you plan the unit.

The first part of the unit will be the same whether you are leading towards essay, poetry and song, or nonfiction books. In order to write, students will first need to learn about their subject. Your class may be studying the Harlem Renaissance, or the Underground Railroad, or Immigration. Or you may collaborate with science to study plants and animals, or volcanoes, or evolution, or geology. Take advantage of local resources so you can incorporate the experiences offered through the natural history museums, science museums, zoos and parks, etc. Therefore we imagine at least a week in which much of this work would be happening in social studies, science, or reading workshop, where the students will be reading a variety of nonfiction texts within a focused study. Students may also be going on field trips, seeing film clips, and looking at art, so it will be important to have one place for them to collect all that they are thinking and learning. They'll be gathering information in their notebooks, and also using their notebooks to reflect on this information and build ideas. You'll need to decide whether they collect their thinking in their writer's notebook or a social studies or science notebook. It's possible, if you don't keep notebooks in science or social studies, that you want to use a folder, or a smaller notebook just for this unit. You may also consider how strong your writers are - more emergent writers may find it easier to have a folder with their notes and drawings, so they can lay everything out on their desk when they get ready to draft, versus flipping back through their notebook and boxing out what they want to use.

In this first part of the unit, the students' writing will consist mostly of observations, facts, and reflections. You'll teach them to write in a few important ways in their notebooks or folders, including note-taking, descriptive writing, summaries, and reflections. Smokey Daniels describes some of this writing in *Subjects Matter*, which may be a helpful resource for you. He encourages students to trade notebooks once a week, and write to each other in their notebooks, responding to each others' research, reflections, and ideas.

To get started, your students will need some material to learn from, and to have some systems for taking notes. It will be helpful if you can include the genres you want them to write in their baskets – look at the reading unit that parallels this one for some advice about setting up baskets for students to read in. The first writing students will do in this unit will really happen at the transition between reading workshop and writing workshop – it will be writing about what they learn as they read. You probably taught them about this during your nonfiction reading unit, and they have also probably learned some systems in social studies and science. If your classroom has relied up to this point on graphic organizers that you copy for the students, this is a good time to teach the students to make their own graphic organizers and develop their own systems for jotting as they read. They'll probably begin by putting post-its on the texts they are reading. Then they can turn to their notebooks, and this is a good time to review the boxes and bullets structure, of:

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Idea

- **Example**
- **Example**
- **Example**

Some of the students' books will naturally be organized this as ideas and examples, and they can use the headings and subheadings to guide their note-taking. Often, however, they'll need to read over the text, think about the idea they have about this section, and then organize their notes with their original ideas and examples they carefully select from the text. Later these will make good ordinate and subordinate sections for an essay. You may also teach your students to write in their notebooks in full sentences and paragraphs, structured along the same lines as the boxes and bullets – almost like mini-essays, with an idea and evidence and perhaps some reflection. For instance, you can model writing a notebook entry that sounds like:

I think Harriet Tubman is amazing because she was so brave. For instance, they tracked her with dogs and teams of men who wanted to capture her. They would track her for miles and miles and she had to walk in streams, and run at night. She was also brave because they did capture her, and she always escaped again. I can hardly imagine being caught, and then waiting for the moment to sneak out again.

You may also teach your students how to make annotated diagrams, drawings, and charts that are carefully labeled. You can imagine the student making a map of Harriet Tubman's journeys in her notebook, or a map of the main paths of the Underground Railroad, and Harriett's stops on it. Or a timeline of her escapes, or even a quick sketch of the plantation she escaped from. The main point of this kind of writing is that it is quick, and it's purpose is to synthesize information and ideas as you read, in order to get ready to write.

Doug Reeves encourages teachers to have students do more descriptive writing in content areas, as he says that it teaches them to write more, to practice close observation and to write with detail. You could teach your students, therefore, in this first part of the unit, to do descriptive writing, especially of the images that they find in their books, as well as the movies they make in their minds as they read. They'll be able to mine these entries when they draft. If your class is studying the Underground Railroad, for instance, you might model by either describing one of the many paintings that exist of Harriet Tubman, (just Google Harriett Tubman if your class books don't have one, and you'll find many), or by envisioning a scene from one of the stories you've done in a read aloud, or from Nikki Giovanni's poem, *Harriett Tubman, in Ego-Tripping*. It might go something like:

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Harriett's dress is dark, and her hair is covered with a dark scarf, as she moves quietly through the woods. The moon is just a sliver and the night is cloudy – maybe she has waited for just such a night. Behind her, in single file, move a man and a woman. They too wear dark clothes...

You'll find that the students' writing will have more voice, and that they'll have more vivid images in their writing, if they learn to do this kind of descriptive writing. Use the websites for museums, use catalogues, for science use the many glorious nonfiction books that have fantastic images, to get your students to write detailed descriptions. Another kind of writing that Doug Reeves and Smokey Daniels encourage when students are writing about nonfiction, is writing summaries, where they read a text, close it, and write about what this text has taught them. Often it sounds like: This book teaches that....

Finally, teach your students to write reflections, where they look over their notes and write entries describing their new understandings and their emotions about what they learn – what they find upsetting, what they admire, etc. This is where they will be developing their own ideas about what they read, and putting those ideas into lots of words. Teach them to use the sentence starters you used for personal and literary essays, such as: Some people think, but I think; in other words; another way to say this is; etc.

Your students should have several pages of writing before they are ready to make genre choices and draft within those genres. Their entries will have notes, descriptions, and reflections for them to draw on. Now you're ready to move to the next bend in the road, which is teaching students to study some mentor texts and consider the genres that will best express their ideas. Teach your students to return to the texts they have studied, and look at them with the lens of writers, thinking about how they work, their structure, and their craft. You may also introduce some mentor texts that illustrate some of these genres, but are not within the content area you are studying, as that helps students envision the qualities of the genre, rather than keep focusing on content. Once your students have browsed the mentor texts, they'll have a vision in their mind of what they will be writing, and that will help focus the collecting and rehearsing they do in their notebooks.

The first thing you'll teach your students as they get ready to draft is to narrow down their subject, as you have in every writing unit. You can demonstrate how you move from a large subject to a more focused one. It's easier to write about birds, for instance, than about eagles, and it's easier to write about eagles than it is to write about how they are endangered, or why they are efficient hunters. One way to differentiate for your writers, thus, is to work with them on narrow and angled their topic is, with your stronger writers writing more narrow topics, and narrow parts of topics, than more emergent writers. Another way to differentiate is that your more knowledgeable writers may move more easily towards ideas, across their text or at least in part. More emergent writers often stick with observations and facts. For instance, a stronger writer might have as his

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

or her subject: George Washington was a great general because his bravery was inspiring.
A more emergent writer may write about: George Washington was a famous General.
Or, perhaps: George Washington was brave.

Teach your students to match genres to their subjects – subjects that are ideas, supported by evidence, will make good essays. Subjects that are about emotions, feelings, and stories will be better poems and songs. Subjects that are really lots of information, can be organized into literary nonfiction books. We organize the next part of this unit by describing the main genres you'll probably consider, and the teaching within these genres.

Let's begin with essay. You'll find these kinds of essays in many places, including in museum catalogues and wall text, magazines such as *National Geographic*, and as forewords to history and sometimes literary texts. If you want your students to write essays, you can find some examples that are suitable for younger writers in *Archaeology* magazine, *Natural History*, and in *Cobblestone*. Or you may, if you want to teach a certain structure, just want to write some with your fellow teachers, and use those as touchstone texts. Nikki Giovanni's book, *Shimmy Shimmy Shimmy like My Sister Kate : Looking at the Harlem Renaissance through Poems*, includes an essay at the front about the Harlem Renaissance, where she describes why she thinks the poetry of this era is so important an example of human fortitude, and then she describes why she chose the poems she did. It's a beautiful example of an essay about ideas and content. If your students are writing essays about artifacts or objects, look at some museum catalogues or visit a museum to look at the wall text. You'll notice the descriptive writing, the comparisons that are made to other objects, and the attention paid to the cultural/historical/scientific period. Your students can do this same writing.

There are three forms of content essay that you may choose to teach your students. One is the idea-based essay that is very similar to the personal and literary essay that your students have probably already written this year. The structure is the same, and what's different is that they are using anecdotes and evidence from their research to support their idea, instead of anecdotes and evidence from their lives or their fiction stories. The basic structure of idea, angled retelling, then evidence is the same. For example, an essay might begin:

Harriet Tubman's greatest gift was that she didn't give up. She brought escaped slaves to safety again and again, helping them to escape their owners and make it to the Underground Railroad. Harriet didn't give up when she was first captured herself – she escaped again. She didn't give up after helping the first group of escaped slaves – she kept going back and back. And she didn't give up even though slavery kept going and didn't stop.

(Then there would be a paragraph giving evidence to support each subordinate idea)

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Another way to write a content essay is for students to write analysis with descriptions of artifacts they are studying. For instance, if they are studying history, including paintings and art of the American Revolution, a student might write an essay about *Washington Crossing the Delaware* that might begin:

George Washington Crossing the Delaware is a painting that makes General Washington seem like a great hero. It does this by making it seem like a very dangerous journey, by making him seem strong and determined, and by showing how all sorts of people supported him. (Then there will be a paragraph of descriptive writing for each of these ideas)

You can also teach students to write comparison essays. For example, they could compare two insects for a science study, or they could compare a bird and the Tyrannosaurus Rex, or they could compare two paintings, or sculptures, or dress in Colonial times, etc. Within the comparison essay will be descriptive writing, which really helps student learn to observe and write with detail. For example, a comparison essay on birds and dinosaurs might start:

Birds and dinosaurs are very similar because they have the same kinds of bones. Their legs are put together the same way, their skulls look a lot alike, and their skeletons make the same kinds of footprints. On the other hand, birds have feathers, and most books show dinosaurs as looking more like lizards. Their skin seems leathery and it's usually the same color as lizards. (Then there will be sections on the birds and dinosaur bones, followed by their skin/feathers)

As you teach your student to draft essays, remember that they already know a lot about writing a thesis-driven essay supported by evidence, and that if they are in grade 4, 5, 6, or 8, they have written these essays using evidence from texts to support their ideas, as well as document-based evidence in social studies. So they don't need days to write these essays. Nor is there any magic that says they need five paragraphs, including 3 examples. They could have two good examples and it could be four paragraphs, or six. They should draft the essay in a day, and then go back and do some revision for the examples they use, including revising for lively descriptive writing, parallel examples, and transitions, just as they learned in your earlier essay units.

If essays are a genre that is particularly well-suited for conveying ideas, poetry and song are particularly well-suited for getting your audience to *feel* something. Show your students how poetry and song has been written to celebrate, to raise spirits in times of darkness, to bear witness, to tell stories, and to protest. These genres will be particularly well-suited to a social studies theme. For poetry and song, turn to the folk culture, protest

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

songs, and spirituals of the era. There are many collections of the songs of the Civil Rights era, including those of Woodie Guthrie, there are written and recorded songs of Black spirituals, including Nikki Giovanni's *On My Journey Now: Looking at African-American History Through the Spirituals*. If you have older students who want to look at contemporary poets who expressed outrage at urban inequity, *Rose That Grew From Concrete*, by Nikki Giovanni and Tupac Shakur might be a mentor text. There are also many narrative poems to consider, such as Longfellow's *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*. Collect lyrics, music, and poetry from the period you are studying, and students can study these for their purpose and their craft. They can also collect contemporary poems and songs that they admire to study as mentor texts.

You may be a little harder pressed to collect poems about science topics. They exist – there are many poems about animals, for instance, and about plants and nature, and some about planets and exploration. If you look online, you'll find sites such as *Ocean Poems* (http://www.k12.hi.us/~shasincl/poems_ocean.html); *Planet Poems* (<http://www.canteach.ca/elementary/songspoems34.html>), and of course many famous poets and songwriters have written individual poems about animals, nature, and science. You and your colleagues can also write some yourself!

Teach your students to collect and study poems and songs first. Then show them how to look over their notes and think “what part of my subject would make sense to try as a poem?” Or, “What might make a beautiful and unusual poem?” Usually vivid images would be powerful as poetic writing. Stories make good narrative poems. Places where the writer felt a strong emotion could be powerful as poems. Remind your students that they have written poetry before, and they should use what they know about poetic language, line breaks, white space, and artful punctuation, as well as using mentor texts to refresh their knowledge of poetic forms.

Some forms of poetry that would make the most sense to focus on might be narrative poetry, songs, including spirituals and protest songs, and odes. *'Twas the Night Before Christmas* is a narrative poem – and narrative poems can be about legends as well as true events. Another example of a narrative poem is Longfellow's poem about *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*. Nikki Giovanni's collection of spirituals of African Americans will give you a rich history of spirituals. Woody Guthrie's *This Land is Your Land*, or the songs of Bob Dylan, as well as many of the songs of contemporary artists, protest current conditions and suggest the dreams and alternatives of the writer. Pablo Neruda's *Odes*, and Nikki Giovanni's ode to Harriet Tubman, show how students can write poetry to bear witness and to pay honor to individuals.

Thus, in this unit students could study immigration, or the civil rights movement, or the Underground Railroad, and they could write from imagined historical perspectives and current perspectives, using poetry and song to tell stories, protest conditions, and celebrate. Poems also make beautiful introductions to essays and other writing. Primo Levi, for instance, as the preface to *Survival at Auschwitz*, writes a poem that gets the

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

reader to feel the emotions of fear and betrayal and haunting memories that he intends to further instill through his book. You may teach your students, therefore, to publish a poem that is followed by an essay or by literary nonfiction. Or they could write a few poems, and then an essay as an introduction to the poems, as Nikki Giovanni does in *Shimmy, Shimmy, Shimmy*.

For literary nonfiction, you'll be teaching your students to write and make the kinds of nonfiction pieces that are prized in students' collections – the small book about the snail, for instance, or the beautiful book about shark's teeth, or perhaps the article about killer whales. You'll be turning to the angled informational writing that students learned to do when they first wrote how-tos, then all-about books, and often feature articles, but here you'll teach your students that they can vary the structure of their writing to include any of these features. First, collect some models that you find particularly compelling, and have your students collect some. Some great models are students' books that you buy in museum and zoo stores, but that you can also buy online for very little cost. You don't need multiple copies of these, so this is a small investment. Books that get students immediately engaged, eager to *make one like that*, include: *Octopus* (Portable Pets) by Abrams, illustrations by L. Rizzatti, which is a book about the octopus in the shape of the octopus; *Under the Sea: Hidden World* by C. Delafosse, which incorporates transparencies to bring the reader the experience of being underground; and *A Look Inside Sharks and Rays* by K. Banister, which layers annotated drawings over each other. You probably have in your nonfiction collections already some of the DK Readers, such as *Shark Attack!* Your students will not be studying the content of all these books, instead they will be studying their features and form. Collect some really compelling articles as well, from *Archaeology*, and *National Geographic for Kids*.

Next, teach your writers to consider how literary nonfiction teaches the reader by giving information and usually by telling stories also. The stories may be given as small embedded narratives, as in the DK Readers, where various human interest stories work as examples of how sharks are dangerous, or through pictures, as in the Portable Pets Octopus, where the pictures tell the story of a day in the life of an octopus. Either way, readers learn to care about the subject through the stories they encounter. Teach your writers that in literary nonfiction, they can include a story. This story can be either a true story, or an invented one that the writer imagines. For instance, many literary nonfiction books include 'imagined moments' in science and history, where the reader learns what it would be like to be on the slope of a volcano, or landing at Ellis Island. What makes literary nonfiction different from just pure historical fiction, is that its intention is to teach, and it usually includes sections of information as well.

As your students look at some samples of literary nonfiction, teach them to notice how information is organized - headings and subheadings, of course, as well as tables of content, glossaries, and illustrations. Teach them to notice categories of information, and how the writing often includes ideas and examples. This will all be familiar to them from their nonfiction reading and from prior experiences of nonfiction writing. Your

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

writers can rehearse the parts of their literary nonfiction by drafting a small moment, informational pages, and perhaps some illustrations.

Next, teach your students to think about the balance of information and story in their pieces. They can return to their mentor texts to look for some models they like. Teach them to think about which texts get the reader to *care about* the subject as well as understand it. You and your students will notice that texts that either give a lot of personal history (they are often written from the perspective of the explorer or scientist), that invite the reader to share the perspective of the subject (as in the day in the life of a lobster), or that tell very engaging small stories (of survival, or discovery, for instance), are often tremendously compelling. Show your students that they can try this writing as well, by writing from the perspective of the animal they have studied, or by sharing their own deep concerns about their subject, or by telling several small stories.

These texts also usually use images in the form of illustrations and/or diagrams. If you choose to give some time to the images, nonfiction picture books are a beautiful option for this unit. Many students choose to make books of great beauty for this unit – it’s worth looking at the value of illustrations, interactive elements, collage, and shapes. You can add these books to the library then, and you’ll have more books on this topic! Teach your students to think about audience as they create their books. Are they creating books for the second or third grade? Are the books for their peers? Are they for a knowledgeable audience or an audience who is unfamiliar with the material? To finish their books, you can include the blurb on the back, and the meet the author page, that young writers so enjoy.

For the last part of the unit, give the students time to use the revision strategies they know. They’ll probably want to look over the drafts they have written and choose a few to combine into one multi-genre piece, or a few to publish as separate pieces. There are a few revision strategies that cross all genres of writing. The first is, writing for readers. Be sure your writers know that one way you will be publishing and celebrating their pieces is to have others read them aloud and/or silently – so, for instance, you can have a silent reading of each other’s literary nonfiction, you can do a gallery walk of their essays as a museum, or they can perform some of each other’s poetry the way they have performed the songs and poetry of published writers. Writers who realize that *others* will be reading their writing aloud and silently have to take their punctuation especially seriously, as it will guide their readers. They also have to write legibly, incorporate their revisions coherently, and write in small enough sections or paragraphs that their readers can navigate their piece.

Another revision strategy that crosses genres is teaching writers to return to their mentor texts, study one or two texts with a partner, and come up with one or two things the published writer did that they too want to try in revision. Teach them to name the technique a writer used and to point in their own writing to where they want to try it. Teach them to look at language, at structure and sequence, at features, and at voice –

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

where the writer seems to speak to the reader. In poetry, remind them to seek the poetic devices you may have taught earlier, such as repetition, rhyme schemes, artful line breaks and white space, metaphor.

Another revision strategy that benefits most young writers is to focus on elaboration through detail. Detailed description, detailed images, and specific technical details and vocabulary will raise the level of their writing. Finally, revising for transitions usually helps most writing that young writers produce. Teach them to look at the transitions between their ideas and examples in their essays, between the sections of their literary nonfiction, and the stanzas of their poems, imagining the challenges their reader faces – and asking a partner to look as well. It’s hard to stay focused on a single subject for many writers, and sometimes a partner can help you see where you are wandering into something else. You can model this by showing how your piece started out about Harriet Tubman, but it also has a separate part on life on the plantations, which you can cut out and glue back into your notebook to use later for something else if you want.

Then get ready to publish! You and your students should be tremendously proud of the independence and effort they have shown, and of the breadth of their expertise and their prowess as writers. Share your achievements in a grade-wide celebration perhaps, or by teaching another grade, or parents, by sharing your pieces.

Word Study to Support Writing Workshop

One of the reasons to teach students poetry is to highlight the beauty in finding just the right, precise, words to convey their meaning. Students are not apt to do this if they are hung up on spelling. By now, many of your students probably have a sense of whether or not they know a particular word or now, and some may be reluctant to spell words they are unsure of. It is probably worth revisiting the mantra, "Give it your best try *and move on*" during the poetry, and to remind students that you really mean it. Writing fluently means writing many words and spelling patterns with automaticity, being brave enough to tackle any word, and flexible enough to use what you know about words to spell as best you can, even if you have a sneaky suspicion it's still not exactly correct. At this point in the year you may want to revisit these strategies, perhaps even freshening up or creating new charts for old strategies, as a reminder to students that you meant it when you said, "Today and *every day*..."

Unit Eight – Memoir

May

Overview of the Unit

In order to put ourselves on the page with honesty and intensity, we and our students need to write within a community of trust. As we ‘round the final bend of the year, this is a good time to teach what it means to really listen to each other and to ourselves.

To teach this unit well, you’ll want to read either Katherine Bomer’s *Writing a Life* or

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Memoir: The Art of Writing Well from the series, *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3-5* (Heinemann, 2006). Plan on this being an amazing, beautiful, moving, climatic unit. In this unit of study on memoir, you can teach students to compose pieces of writing but also to compose lives in which writing matters. When we, as writers, really listen to ourselves and each other, an entry or a topic can grow in significance.

Collecting: Writing to Discover Our Thinking and Writing With Depth

At the start of the unit, you may want to invite students to search for Life Topics. Life Topics can be found by rereading notebooks, reconsidering lives, and by living, conscious of the topics that feel intensely alive and close to the heart. Students often begin by writing about gigantic Life Topics, such as ambivalence over growing older, worries over weight, an appreciation for one's grandmother. A second-step will be to remind them of the saying, "The bigger the topic, the smaller we write."

In some classes, students in this unit of study refer to their seed idea as a *blob* idea, imagining a glowing, living, amorphous form. Students learn that the process of choosing a seed idea is a more flexible one than they'd first learned, and that, as they live with a Life Topic, their sense of what it is they really want to say changes. You will probably

encourage writers to use writing as a way to develop their own ideas and associations around a Life Topic, writing-to-learn in their writers' notebooks.

If you are angling this unit so as to support independence, you will probably tell students, "This time, you need to compose a writing life for yourself. You can draw on any strategy you have learned this year, or invent new strategies. Your job is to decide what to do in order to write something that captures all you want to say." This unit, then, allows you to encourage students to shake free from any scaffolds that limit them, to make resourceful use of scaffolds that help, and to do all this in the service of their own important writing projects. As students invent this writing project, they will also be inventing their own identities as writers, preparing themselves to go forth with independence into the rest of their lives.

In this unit, your emphasis will probably not be so much on strategies for *generating* writing as on strategies for *writing with depth*. For example, you may want to teach students that writers sometimes find it helpful to write about a single topic from several perspectives. Usually ideas about any one topic are complicated, so once a writer has written about one set of ideas on a topic, the writer can come back and revisit the topic, writing an entry that begins, "On the other hand . . ." In the end, some of the best writing will result from efforts to get mental and emotional arms around the full breadth of a topic. Then, too, we teach students the wisdom of Eudora Welty's advice, "Write what you *don't know* about what you know." Where are the mysteries, the questions, the feelings of angst for you in this beloved, close-to-home topic?

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Using Literature to Support Memoir Writing

Students will read literature in this unit first because great literature can serve, as Kafka writes, “as an ice-axe to break the frozen sea within us.” Literature calls us from our hiding places, helping us to bring ourselves to the page. The importance of this can’t be over-emphasized. Of any quality of good writing, the one which matters the most may be that elusive quality writers refer to as *voice*. A person writes with voice when that person allows the imprint of his or her personality to come through in his or her writing.

But students also read literature in order to study the craftsmanship of other writers. Because students have responsibility for imagining a way to structure their memoir, they will read the memoir that other authors have written with a special attentiveness to structure. That is, in this unit, you may not want to say, “This is how your writing will be structured.” Instead, you may decide to teach students that writers often begin with an emerging content, and then combine and create structures (drawing from our internalized repertoire of structures) that will allow us to say whatever it is we want say.

As students develop their seed idea (or their “blob” if it feels too big to be called a seed!), it will be crucial for them to ask themselves, “What is it I really want to say?” This is a memoir, so the draft will not be about the events alone. Instead, it will be about the person to whom those events happened. Students need to think, “Who do I want to be in this writing?” “What am I trying to say about myself in this piece?” “What am I realizing about myself as I write this?” “What do I want my readers to know about me?” Once a student has begun to figure out what he or she is trying to say, it will be important to deliberately write in ways that highlight that meaning.

Although writers can make calculated decisions to organize a text in one way or another, the actual process of writing is more passion-hot than critic-cold. Milton Meltzer, the great nonfiction writer for students, has said, “In the writer who cares, there is a pressure of feelings which emerges the rhythm of sentences, in the choice of details, in the color of the language.”

Drafting: Calling Forward What We Know About Structure and Creating Our Own Structure

When it comes time for students to begin thinking about starting a draft, you’ll want to invite each student to first plan out how his or her piece might go. It helps to tell students that when a writer’s content is so rich and so precious to us, we don’t just pour it into a pre-fabricated form. Instead we invent a form that will carry the message we want to convey. Will the piece contain one focused narrative? Two stories held together by some exposition? Will there be a thesis and development?

You’ll want to invite students to study pieces which illustrate that writers often combine narrative as well as essay structures into single pieces which defy easy labels. “Eleven,” by Sandra Cisneros from *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* could be in that folder—and don’t worry if students have studied it before. I also recommend “Not

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Enough Emilys” from *Hey, World, Here I Am* by Jean Little and “My Grandmother’s Hair” by Cynthia Rylant from the anthology *Home*. You may want to invite students to examine their texts for structure, boxing out sections that resemble the narratives they will have written all year and sections that resemble essays.

Some students will write their narratives as a story, while others will write a collection of short texts. Some students will write essays that are more journeys of-thought rather than traditional thesis-driven essays. The choice of structure needs to be left in the writer’s hands this time. Mostly, students discover that the structures they’ve learned to use throughout the year are not as inflexible as they once thought, and they create texts which are hybrids, containing perhaps one long narrative section set off against a thesis-driven expository paragraph.

As students create structures that will support their content, they will learn about revision in a whole new way. They will come to understand that writing is a process of growing meaning, and that writers use strategies as needed, as we reach to create meanings that feel deeply significant and personal.

Word Study to Support Writing Workshop

If your students are writing memoir, this means that you’ve probably spent a good deal of time reading aloud vocabulary-rich memoir leading up to this unit to support students’ knowledge of the content. As you read aloud your kids are being immersed in rich vocabulary and literary language. Encourage your kids to use new vocabulary when they turn and talk about the texts you read. Do not be surprised if they are reluctant to use the new words unless you remind them to do so. Many teachers find it helpful to create simple charts of some of the new vocabulary to display around the room during writing time, to remind kids to use the new words when they are talking *and* when they are writing. Throughout this unit, encourage kids to refer to the charts to find just the right words to use, and to write it using the words a scientist would use.

Good writing is also rich with words with meaning-based spelling patterns (or morphemes). By now many of your students are at the stage of spelling where they have begun to study some of these meaning-based spelling patterns. Earlier in the year we taught them some simple strategies for using the meaning of a word to help them spell unfamiliar words. At this point in the year, you will probably want to revisit that strategy, only this time, it’s not just the prefixes and suffixes of words that might hold meaning, it’s also the root of the word. Teach kids to use the roots that they’ve been studying during word study to help them spell tricky words during writing workshop. Remind partners to encourage each other to use this strategy in addition to all the other strategies they’ve learned so far this year. Of course, you’ll only refer to roots of words as a strategy for spelling if you have been doing that sort of work in your word study time of day, particularly if you are using *Words Their Way*.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Unit Nine – Revision

June

Now I see revision as a beautiful word of hope. It's a new vision of something. It means you don't have to be perfect for the first time. What a relief!

-Naomi Shihab Nye

By the time I am nearing the end of a story, the first part will have been reread and altered and corrected at least one hundred and fifty times. I am suspicious of both facility and speed. Good writing is essentially rewriting. I am positive of this.

-Roald Dahl

Writing is a powerful tool for thinking because when we write, we can take fleeting and intangible memories, insights and images, and make them concrete. When we talk, our thoughts float away. When we write, our thoughts stay with us, on the page. But another power of writing lies in the possibility of reconsidering previous work, of changing our words so they match our latest and best ideas to the best of our abilities as writers. We all wish we could do that as we're speaking: take something back, or go back in time to say something another way; in writing, we have this power. We can reread our first thoughts and see gaps in them. Through rereading and revision, writing becomes a tool for making our thinking better.

Many students view revision as a quick fix in the writing process – a place only to change a word here, or add a sentence there. While revision does exist on the word or sentence level, we want our writers, as they become more proficient, to see revision as reworking or revisiting entire parts, and ultimately, the whole of a piece. Revision allows students to stop and reflect on the larger meaning of what they've written. We can show writers that stepping back, and looking at a piece, asking “What is it I want my piece to show?” or “What does this moment say about my life?” can allow them to find a deeper importance, maybe one they didn't realize was there. Revision is also an opportunity to practice what we know as writers, to use craft to create the effects we desire. We encourage this thinking during any writing cycle, but sometimes it's hard to truly “step back” from a piece that we are currently writing, especially if a publishing date is looming just over the horizon.

Our middle school students tend to see their work as decontextualized, partly because they move from classroom to classroom, and partly because they change so dramatically from week to week (physically and emotionally). It is common for them to see each writing project as a separate “assignment” which ends at the publishing party and is never thought about again. To combat this attitude, which breeds disengagement, it is critical for us to offer students chances to look more holistically at themselves and their work. A unit on revision makes clear that the work of the year has been building on itself, and that

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

there is value in what they did earlier in the year. By helping students see how they've grown as writers, we help them appreciate the work they've actually done and to see it as a renewable resource. We also encourage our students to rethink themselves through rethinking the meaning of their work. Given that our 6th graders will be acting and feeling more like 7th graders by June, it is probable that what they care about, what they dream about, what they write about has shifted across the 10 months of school. We honor these changes by inviting our writers to revise with their new hearts to make new meaning.

In this unit, then, instead of going back into their notebooks to collect ideas, choose seed ideas, and draft, students will look back at the pieces of writing they have created so far, starting with their first on demand piece from September, and begin by reflecting on all the ways in which they have grown as writers. Inevitably, they will also bring to their reflection the ways in which they have grown personally. This will open up the possibility of more radical and transformative revision: they will be more accomplished writers, and they will be different people. These changes in themselves will help them make significant changes in their previous writing. Students will revise their on demand piece and then choose a second piece to revise, redraft, edit and publish.

Teach the Importance of Carrying Forward All We've Learned:
Students Revise Their First On Demand Narrative Writing

At the beginning of this unit, we help students see that they have grown as writers, that they know more now about writing than they did in the beginning of the year. We ask them to look back at the first on demand writing that they wrote in September, and we teach them to see with their June eyes how their writing could improve. They will spend several days trying different revision strategies to make this first piece of writing read like an end-of-the-year piece.

We began the year with assessment of on demand writing; we return to assessment now, but give this power to the students. You may invite them to look with a critical eye at their work, using past charts for strategies in that genre, past rubrics, and their own writer's notebooks to decide what works in their on demand and what could be better. Especially if the narrative continuum played a role in your teaching of narrative writing throughout the year, now is the time to return to this as a way to help students see where their writing is and where it could be. In all of our teaching, but especially in this unit of study, it is critical to help students apply all they've learned about revision during the year. We want their work in this month to reflect the cumulative nature of workshop teaching. We can begin by having students recall revision strategies they've practiced throughout the year.

Students learn to reconsider the sequence of their stories, thinking about where to build suspense, where to start, and where to end. You may decide to teach more sophisticated sequence structures, such as flashback or parallel narratives, either to a whole group of writers who are ready, or to small groups of writers ready for a challenge. They then

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

learn revision strategies for re-sequencing, including cutting and stapling. Adding details is an important part of revision. Students can reread their pieces and think about which part of pieces are the most important sections, and they can elaborate upon those sections. If writers are having a hard time figuring out the most important part of a story, they might ask themselves, “Where in my story do I convey the biggest feelings or the most important ideas?” For example, a student rereading a story he wrote about a crucial basketball game could realize that the most important part happened when he decided to pass the ball instead of running it himself. He will then decide to develop this part of the story, adding in dialogue and small actions that show his feelings. You can teach strategies for adding more details to the text using strips of paper in the middle of sections. It is important to teach students the reasons for altering a draft, as well as the physical work of revision.

You may also want to teach students to review their leads and endings. Show kids that they can try writing a few different versions of any part of their story, and then think about which version works best. In order to write new leads or endings, students can study mentor texts the class has read, naming what the writer did that the student might emulate. For example, students might reread the ending of *Everything Will Be Okay* and recognize that James Howe ended the piece with a new realization. They could then try to write similarly in their own pieces. They might notice that an author started off her writing by describing the setting and try to write similarly.

By the end of a few days, the students will have made major changes to their early work. The point of this first round is to give them a feeling of strength as revisers: they know so much more now than they did earlier in the year, and they should feel it as they prepare to choose a piece to revise and republish.

Teach the Purposes of Revision, Recalling All We Know About Good Writing, and Some New Revision Strategies

A key point in this unit is that revision is a complement to good work, not only a way to fix up work that needs help. We now ask students to look back at the writing pieces they have published across the year and ask, “Which piece feels worthy of revision?”

Generally, the pieces students select should be meaningful (this may or may not be evident in the writing yet). The least successful writing pieces may not be worth deep revision, even if it seems there is much to revise in them, since these pieces may not feel significant to the writer. Students will place the pieces they select in a special revision folder to revise. They may begin their revision work by writing long in their notebooks about why they want to revise this piece and what they want to change about it.

At this point it will be helpful if students are in clubs for revision within particular genres. So if there are three students who have chosen to revise their historical fiction stories, they should be in a club for that genre. If four students are revising their personal essays, they should be in a club for essay. This way you can tailor your conferences to groups of students writing in the same genre who will be likely to encounter similar problems. Students can also support each other in this work. (See below: peer revision)

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

In every stage of the writing cycle, purpose is key. This holds true tenfold for revision. Students need reasons to change their writing. At the beginning of this unit, we can teach them to think purposefully about revision, and to decide why they want to change their writing before jumping into the craft moves that will help them change it successfully.

There are many reasons why writers change their writing, and we can offer these as possible revision purposes for students. Sometimes, writers realize that the way they wrote something doesn't match what they really intended to say. In narrative writing, this often happens if a scene doesn't quite come alive in full detail for the reader, or if the heart of the story doesn't seem important enough. In essay writing, this can happen if the thesis statement is not clear or is not supported throughout the whole of the essay. Sometimes, writers decide that they've changed their thinking about the piece. In narrative writing, secondary characters may seem more important upon rereading, and need more elaboration. Essay writers may have new evidence to support their ideas from earlier in the year; or they may have shifted their thinking about the subject and need to modify their thesis. You will want to model for students how you think through some of these possible reasons to revise, using pieces you've written with them earlier in the year.

Audience is another real reason to revise: we revise when we have in mind a particular person or group of people that we know will be reading our work, keeping in mind the effect we want the piece to have on that particular person or group. You may give the students an audience for their newly revised pieces by stating from the outset that all the pieces will go immediately to their new teacher as an introduction to their writing, or by planning a celebration where they present their work to the incoming sixth grade class. You may give students the opportunity to choose an audience for their piece, either in addition to or instead of the whole-class publishing, thereby letting them decide who they want to read their piece and why.

Many middle school students are apprehensive about revision because they "like it the way it is." We can immerse students in examples of revision by showing them how we revise stories from previous units of study, how past students revised (by showing a sample of a former student's work) and by revising class stories together. If you wrote a class story or two in the first few units on chart paper or a transparency, you can have students join you in revising the class story using a variety of strategies.

You will want to add to your students' revision toolbox during this unit. Consider teaching revision strategies that are somewhat dramatic, and some strategies that appear to be subtle, but are still effective. Dramatic revision includes cutting to the bone, rereading a piece and asking after every sentence: is this necessary? Another possible revision for narrative writing is to think like a movie director and decide where to pan out for a wider view, and where to really zoom in on a tiny detail. There may be places where a sweeping view of the whole of a scene might be particularly effective, like looking across the entire lunch room and noticing all the tables crammed with kids laughing and eating, and other places where the close-up of a trembling hand might tell the story best. More sophisticated writers may be ready to consider using symbolism in

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

their narrative writing: you can teach them to find an object or a setting that stands for something larger than itself, and to repeat that image a few times throughout the piece as a way to give it significance. For example, in that same basketball story, the writer may decide that he will use the red jerseys of the opposing team to represent the fear that the character felt during the game. At crucial moments, when the character was feeling afraid, the writer will return to a view of the red jerseys: “I knew I had to make a choice. Run or pass. Run or pass. The red shirts in front of me bobbed around. What should I do?”

Some writers may need to read their work out loud, and they may try revising by first changing the tone of voice they read with, then changing the writing to match the tone they like the best. In both narrative and essay writing, it’s worth considering the use of repetition by both trying out the repeated use of particular words or phrases and by making sure that there is not unplanned repetition of nonessential words or phrases. For more ideas on new revision strategies, you may wish to consult Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi’s books on revision, *Craft Lessons* and *Nonfiction Craft Lessons*, as well as Georgia Heard’s *The Revision Toolbox* (Not just for poetry...) For your own reference, you may also be interested in Roy Peter Clark’s *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*.

Create a Writing Center that Supports Revision

Materials and tools always seem to be an issue when it comes to revision. Tell students that part of the work involved in revision is not only deciding what you want to revise, but how you will revise and the tools that will support that work. For this reason giving students opportunities to use varied revision tools can help energize and encourage independence. Giving writers a revision folder and a color pen usually motivates them to bring zealous energy to the job of revising writing. You will want to be sure that students have access to a variety of tools including perhaps strips of paper to add sentences and sections into the middle of their writing, flaps of paper to tape over neglected parts of their stories, and single sheets of paper to staple onto the end or the middle parts. You may also want your students to have access to post-it notes, tape, staplers and scissors during writing workshop.

You may want to create a chart for the writing center that lists the tools, what they can be used for, and what revision strategies they support. For example, you might list the tool “strips of paper,” and then describe a use of paper strips—to add details. You can describe strategies for how you can add dialogue, internal thinking, or physical description when adding details with the strips so students use them for specific reasons. This will help shift the focus to the strips and towards revision strategies. We also recommend that students be encouraged to create their own revision tools and possible usages.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

Use Partnerships and Writing Clubs to Support Revision

This unit is a great opportunity to strengthen your writing community and teach students how to give each other constructive feedback. You may teach strategies for revision in a minilesson and send kids off to work with a partner on how they could try those strategies before they begin independent writing. In this case, partner conferences are used prior to writing as a way of planning for revision. Or you can teach a revision strategy, send students off to write independently, and then give partnerships time to meet at the end of the workshop. This allows students to share how the strategies are helping the piece or to ask each other for further suggestions. You'll want to remind students that they don't need to take all of their partners' suggestions and that a suggestion is just that, not a command. Partners can read and reread their stories together, thinking more deeply about their pieces.

If students are organized into clubs based on the genre of their writing, give them time at the end of a work session to talk in their clubs about what they tried, what worked, and what they're still having trouble with. You can support the focus of the club talk by requiring that they "workshop" one writer's piece each day. So Writer 1 will share out his work on Monday; Writer 2 on Tuesday, etc. This way there is a sense that the whole club will focus on one writer's piece, and there is an understanding that every writer is expected to open up her work to the club.

Clubs may want to choose a mentor text in their genre to serve as a guidepost for their revisions and talks about their writing. Students may choose from touchstone texts that you've read as a class, from the narrative continuum if they're in narrative writing, or from other sources which you may have available to them in folders organized by genre. During the first days of club work, the clubs may spend their time at the end of writing workshop reading the mentor text as writers to come up with some of their own language for what they want to try in their writing, based on their mentor author's work.

While many teachers give students revision checklists, it is often more helpful to list revision strategies in step-by-step ways on a chart. These charts can be typed up, given to students, stored in their revision folders, and used during partner conferences or club talks. In this way clubs can discuss strategies such as adding setting by creating a movie in their minds, remembering where the characters were and what was around them and then adding description. We want to push writers to not just say, "I am going to add setting here," but to say, "I am going to describe the kitchen by adding, "A round white table sat in the middle of the room with five wooden chairs around it..." By discussing the specific revisions they could make, students are more apt to follow through with what they said.

Celebrate the Process and the Published Pieces

This unit ends with a celebration of the many ways students have learned to revise, and with the knowledge that these revision strategies will continue to help students as they write during the remaining units of study. Some teachers copy students' original pieces and then (during the celebrations) students share and discuss how they revised the piece specifically. Other teachers have students write a brief reflection of their revision process

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project
Middle School Writing Curriculum Calendar 2008-2009
DRAFT

and how this helped the published piece of writing grow better but also how they grew as a writer. When sharing the pieces, some students choose to share one part of the story before and after revisions were made and to share why they chose those revisions to make the piece better.

Word Study in Third Grade to Support Writing Workshop

Across the year, you've encouraged kids to give tricky words their best try, to move on, to use spelling patterns from word study to spell tricky words, and to use the word wall to help them learn commonly misspelled high frequency words. You've nudged kids to use big fancy vocabulary, even when they aren't sure of the exact spelling, and you've been studying words throughout the day, during word study, read aloud, and other times of the day.

Now is the time of year to bring it all together. Dust off all the old charts if you've still got them, and teach kids to use it all, all the time. In this unit, you may want to teach kids that they can create their own, personal editing checklists by looking across their own writing to notice the kinds of things they need reminders for. Writers notice their own spelling challenges so that they can be on the lookout. Anybody who writes knows their own weaknesses. Teach kids to search their writing to see if they are the kind of writer who misspells certain high frequency words every time. Or maybe they are the kind of writer who always forgets a particular spelling pattern, or do they forget to reread their writing to check it over? Teach kids that everybody has something, or even a bunch of things, that are patterns in their writing. Finding those patterns and knowing to double check for them is incredibly useful.