

Up the Ladder: Accessing Grades 3–6 Information Units of Study

Lucy Calkins, Hareem Atif Khan, and Shana Frazin

Photography by Peter Cunningham

Illustrations by Kimberly Fox

HEINEMANN ♦ PORTSMOUTH, NH



Writing Lots of Books that Teach

BEND |



A PREFACE TO

Bend I: Writing Lots of Books that Teach

This unit has been written for upper-grade students who have not received a lot of instruction in the kind of writing that falls under the umbrella of information/nonfiction writing. The unit provides them with lots of opportunities to write information texts on topics of personal expertise. The unit helps them envision the larger topic of an information text as being comprised of smaller subtopics, and to write about each of those subtopics separately, bucketing them. Students are given repeated opportunities to practice doing this work and a handful of planning and revision strategies to help them. They also learn to write with concrete, specific information and to elaborate, saying more about kernels of information. The goal of the unit is to accelerate students' growth in this genre while also helping them to build their identities as writers, their volume of writing. Above all, the unit aims to help youngsters learn to love writing.

You could teach this as your very first writing workshop unit, but it has actually been written with the assumption that you already launched the writing workshop in a narrative unit. If the decision is made that you'll bypass narrative work, you'll need to do a little backpeddling because this unit begins with the assumption that students have already learned some of the routines and structures of writing workshop. They sit with another student in the minilessons and that other person is their partner. Usually partnerships last for the duration of a unit, if not longer. This structure is very helpful to youngsters, and it is even helpful to name one person in each partnership as "Partner 1" and one as "Partner 2" so that you can suggest that when kids turn and talk during the minilesson, sometimes Partner 1 takes the lead, and

sometimes Partner 2 does. That way the same child doesn't dominate repeatedly.

You'll find the *Guide to the Writing Workshop* contains many tips such as that one. That book can give you a super-quick crash course in managing a writing workshop and in the major methods that you use repeatedly when teaching writing. It is more to read—but it'll help a lot.

Our hope is that if you did launch your students with the narrative Up the Ladder unit, by now, your students will be more able to carry on as writers during writing time, and you will be finding it easier to confer and lead small groups. Aim to lead at least one small group and a few conferences every day. The kids don't need exhaustive one-to-one instruction, but they really profit from quick coaching. There are tips within each session on small groups that you will want to lead that day and conferences that will be especially helpful. Really, the content of those sections of this book pertains to every other day. Ideally, you will compile a repertoire of conferring and small-group ideas and draw on them in response to what you see your youngsters doing.

We encourage you to regard a session as a day. If the unit suggests that your kids will write a table of contents in a day, but your kids want to write with really beautiful fonts and to list twelve chapter titles, thereby taking two days on just the table of contents, we suggest you revisit. Perhaps they'll want to bring that work home to complete, because in class, they'll have new work to do tomorrow. And the truth is, a table of contents that is dashed down quickly and lists five chapters will work better anyhow! And that tip relates not only to the day in which kids write their tables of contents, but to every day.

You'll see that this bend invites kids to essentially write an information book on Days One, Three, and Five and to revise those books on Days Two, Four, and Six. That may seem awfully ambitious to you, but remember that the goal of the unit is for kids to be given lots and lots of opportunities for repeated independent practice, not to produce perfect pieces. You'll teach kids how to choose a topic, to plan their book, and to write it. During the first bend, it will be important for you to channel writers to write in booklets that give them ambitious but realistic goals.

You enter this unit knowing about the volume of writing your writers produce in one sitting. Use this data to inform what paper you guide students toward. That is, if students currently fill a sheet of lined notebook paper in one sitting, then you will want to guide those students toward paper with lots of lines. It is important to remember they'll be drafting books of four to six pages in a day. If you think, however, that your writers can only write a few small paragraphs in a day's writing time, then give them booklets full of paper that is just a bit beyond those expectations.

Of course, your expectations will differ based on the specific child, so plan on having three or four different sorts of booklets in play, and on moving kids from a less to a more advanced booklet between the start and the end of Bend I. You will find a variety of templates for paper choices to support your writers in the online resources.

The major work that you are inviting kids to do is to take a topic they know about and to use information writing as a way to teach others about that topic. For now, you aren't worrying about their writing having a lead that hooks readers, or an ending that wraps things up, or anything else. Your goal is for writers to write fluently, and to feel as if they are teaching on the page. You also hope they put one thing (one subtopic) on each page.

As soon as writers have books drafted, you'll begin to lift their knowledge of good information writing. You'll teach writers that they can

revise their writing to add on to it, and that one way to do that is to ask the sorts of questions that readers might ask: Who? What? Where? Why? Later you'll teach writers that information books are comprised of information, and that concrete, particular information matters. You'll encourage them to write with names, numbers, quotes, and details.

Of course, part of this will involve supporting revision. You will want to see students going back to add more details to their pieces, either to their drawings or their words or both. Your students will revise in concrete manipulative ways through the use of revision strips, giant Post-its, and flaps stuck off the edges of a page.

You'll teach students to search for and eliminate run-on sentences. Run-ons are a predictable outgrowth of elaboration. As you teach kids to write more about their topics, they will invariably do this by using "Scotch-tape" words like *and*, *so*, and *then*. You'll also want your students to apply the editing work they've learned in previous units. You'll create a "New and Improved Editing Checklist" that channels kids to continue to use all they know to make their writing presentable while adding this new skill of editing for run-ons into the mix.

By the end of the bend, your students' folders should be stuffed with several completed books—and you will also want to see evidence that these pieces have been revised. A word to the wise: Don't feel that your kids need to recopy their books, fixing every error, prior to publication. In this unit, we are suggesting three bends, which means three celebrations. You probably don't want to stop your kids' forward progress by having them devote a day (and we know it generally turns into several days) to the slow work of recopying their rough-draft writing.

You will notice that this bend ends with a small celebration. You may decide to create a splashier one. Celebrations matter. They provide an opportunity for your students to glory in their progress. Reveling in your students' writing will help them develop identities as writers and will rally enthusiasm for the work to come in Bend II.



Session 1


Writers Write to Teach

IN THIS SESSION

TODAY YOU'LL teach students that writers plan information books much like they plan true stories. They think of a topic, touch and tell a page, sketch what they'll write, write that page, and then repeat the process with the next page.

TODAY STUDENTS will write their first information book. Expect to see them writing about their topic across multiple pages.

GETTING READY

- ✓ Before this session, be sure to stock your writing center with blank booklets. We recommend your booklets be four to six pages. The number of lines per page will differ based on your expectation for each writer; you are expecting writers to complete a booklet a day. ✨
- ✓ Pair students with writing partners, and ask them to sit in the meeting area next to their writing partner. This will happen every day (see Connection).
- ✓ Display the "How to Write an Information Book" anchor chart (see Teaching). ✨
- ✓ Choose a topic and prepare to model how to plan an information book. We model with "All about Fireworks" (see Teaching). ✨
- ✓ Make a giant booklet out of chart paper to demonstrate for students how you plan (see Teaching).
- ✓ Prepare to distribute blank booklets to students, and add additional blank pages to students' tables (see Active Engagement and Link). ✨
- ✓ Print small copies of "Topics for Information Writing" for students in small groups (see Conferring and Small-Group Work). ✨
- ✓ Clear out students' writing folders from the earlier narrative unit, or if you did not teach that unit, prepare a writing folder for each student, with a red dot on one pocket for work that is stopped and a green dot on the other pocket for work that is still underway (see Share).
- ✓ Scan the QR code to view the brief video to get a vision for how the work in this minilesson might sound. There is a video available for every minilesson.  hein.pub/UTLINFO_1
- ✓ Review tips for additional support when working with English as a New Language (ENL) students at the end of this and every session.



Writers Write to Teach

CONNECTION

Rally students to a new unit on information writing by helping them realize they can be powerful teachers on topics they know a lot about.

"Writers, we haven't been together that long, but I'm already realizing something about you. I thought *I* was the teacher in this room, but I'm coming to realize . . ." I dropped my voice to a whisper. "Sometimes *I'm the student*. It's the truth. When you talk about things like Nerf guns or creating your own apps, I realize that I'm *not* the only teacher in this room. On a million topics, you are my teachers."

Model how to generate topics on which you are an expert. Give partnerships time to share topics they know a lot about.

"Think for a second about a topic on which you're an expert, one that you could teach others." I left a moment for silence. "Are you thinking of things you do often? Things you love? A place you visit a lot?"

"I'll start. Hmm, . . . What's something I do a lot or love? I know! Every July, I love watching the fireworks. So I could teach 'fireworks.' What about you? Think of one topic, for now, any one. Ready to whisper your topic to your partner?" I waited a sec to let momentum build, then said, "Go!"

After children shared for twenty seconds, I reconvened them, saying, "This month in our writing workshop, you'll be doing information writing, nonfiction writing. You'll write lots of books in which you teach readers all about a topic. But you can't just pick up the pen and begin scribbling in your book. Your information would be all jumbled! Instead, you need to plan."

❁ Name the teaching point.

"Today I want to teach you that before writers write an information book, they plan how their book will go. You plan your book by thinking of a topic, touching and telling a page, quickly sketching what you'll write on that page, and then writing. Then you repeat that on each new page."

◆ COACHING

If a student or two do not have a topic, you can suggest topics that you know almost any student could write about—the school, the playground, the mall.

If you examine the details of this transcript, you'll get a sense for the ways in which your pacing can create momentum and energy. Trust the power of silences that give kids a half-moment to think, and of urgent quick commands—Go!—that mobilize kids quickly. Become skilled at reconvening kids' attention.

When delivering this teaching point—and any teaching point—don't hesitate to look down at the page of the book a little as you talk, gathering the words into your mind and then saying them—so it sounds like talk, not read-aloud, yet you stay close to the actual transcript. Usually, it works best to stay close to the wording in the book, as that wording is woven into anchor charts and future sessions.

TEACHING

Connect the work students do to write true stories about their lives to the work that information writers do as they write teaching books: think, touch and tell, sketch, and write.

"Do you remember how you learned that when writers are writing stories, it helps to think of an idea, then touch and tell the story across pages, then sketch the story and then write? Well, now that you're writing teaching books, I made a few little changes to the 'How to Write a True Story' chart so that it matches this new type of writing you will be doing." I revealed a new chart.

ANCHOR CHART

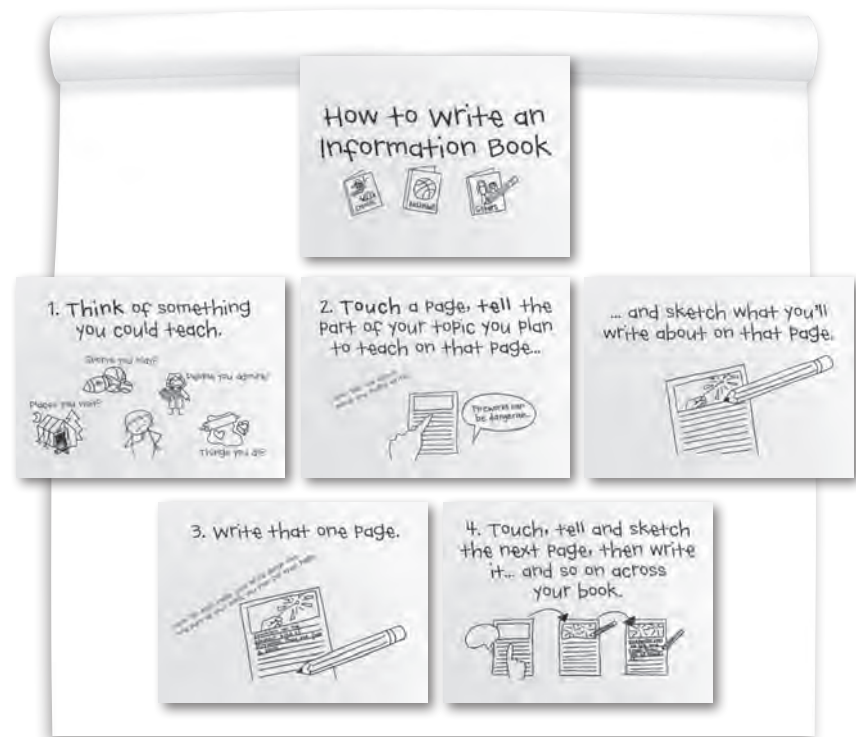
How to Write an Information Book

1. **Think** of something you could teach.
Things you do?
Places you visit?
Sports you play?
People you admire?
2. **Touch** a page, **tell** the part of your topic you plan to teach on that page, and **sketch** the things you'll write about.
Say the actual words you might write.
3. **Write that one page.**
On each page, just write about the one part of your topic you plan for that page.
4. **Touch and tell and sketch** the next page, then write it . . . and so on through your book.

Recruit kids to join you as you plan for your information book.

"Will you notice whether I do each of these things as I plan my information book?" I shifted into the role of writer, holding up a giant chart-sized book. "I decided my topic would be fireworks," I said, glancing up at the chart. "To get started, I'll touch the page and tell the parts of my topic I'll teach on the first page." I touched the first page. "Let's see. On the first page I could teach you about kinds of fireworks. Could you help me come up with things to teach related to that?" A buzz of talk began.

The planning process you are teaching differs in this unit from that which your students used in the narrative unit. When writing information books, we recommend students sketch then write one page at a time. Narrative writing has a coherence and unity from beginning to end that requires an overarching plan. Information writing, on the other hand, is composed of a number of subtopics—discrete chunks of content. Young writers often deal with their subtopics one at a time.



After a few seconds, I reconvened the class. “You’ve given me awesome help. You are right that I can teach about sparklers on this page, and about the kind of fireworks that burst into flower shapes in the sky.” I started drawing a sparkler—and muttered quietly, as if I were thinking aloud to myself, “They are pretty simple, just a sparkle at the end of a stick.” After drawing a sparkler, I quickly sketched a firecracker that bursts into flower shapes and floats down. I then made a rocket that shoots up in a tight spiral, and said, “I’m ready to write now. I’m going to tell about the sparkler first—it is the simplest—then the flower, then the spiral.” I added numbers alongside each.

I picked up a marker and wrote, “Sparklers are the simplest kind of fireworks. They are just a stick . . .”

Then I paused, and said, “When I finish writing *all* I know about kinds of fireworks on this page, I’ll go to this next page. Maybe then I’ll teach people that fireworks are dangerous.”

Debrief your modeling so it feels replicable to your students.

“Are you noticing the steps we’ve used so far?” I gestured toward chart. “First, we thought of a topic, then we touched and told a page, and then quickly sketched what we’ll write on that page. Now, we’re ready to write long before we move to the next page.”

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Channel students to plan the sections of their information book with their partner.

“Are you ready to try this planning with your own topic?” I passed around blank booklets.

“Will either you or your partner pick up your booklet, touch the pages, and tell in just a word, what you’re going to write on each page? Then go back to page one and say *all* that you’ll write on that one page. As your partner talks, lean in and listen and even . . . guess what . . . ask questions!”

As kids broke into a buzz, teaching each other, I circulated among them, leaning in and nodding encouragement, occasionally prompting and coaching:

- “Say the exact words you’ll write on that page.”
- “It sounds like you just moved to a new thing about your topic. That would go on the *next* page. Stay with this topic on this page.”
- “Lean in as your partner talks. Listen in a way that helps your partner say more.”

After a minute, I said, “Cia realized she was starting to teach about a new part of her topic, and so you know what she did? She turned the page so the new information went on its own page! Well done!”

Teachers, it’s okay that children get started and do not completely finish this, and it is definitely okay that there is not enough time for all partners to exchange roles. Your goal is to teach writers that this sort of planning helps, not to make sure each writer leaves the mini-lesson with a fully planned book.

LINK

Remind students that planning is an integral part of information writing. One way that writers plan is by thinking of a topic, touching and telling, sketching, and then writing.

"Writers, in a minute you'll grab your pens and get to work writing up a storm. I left lots of blank pages in the middle of your tables in case you need to add to your book. Before you start," I gestured toward our chart and read off, "remember that you need to . . . think of a topic, touch and tell what you'll teach across the pages, sketch out what you'll teach, and then you write. Off you go to sketch and write!"

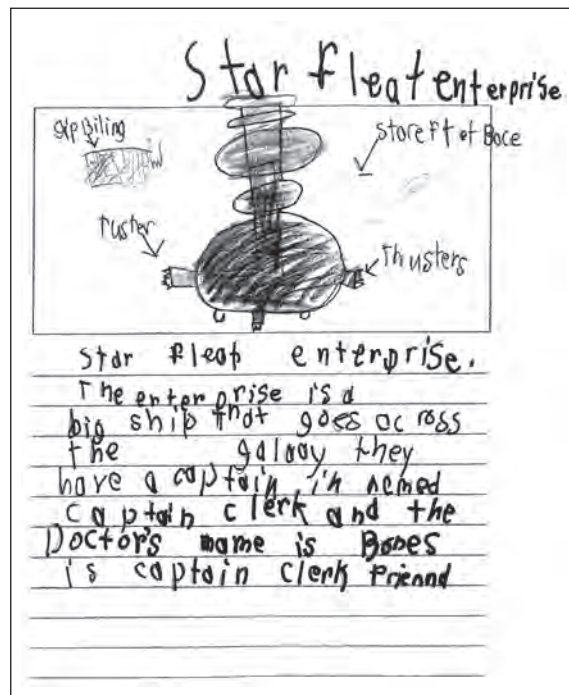


FIG. 1-1 This writer is a *Star Wars* fan!

It may seem counterintuitive to interrupt the turn-and-talk this quickly, rather than waiting for kids to exhaust all they have to say. In fact, calling back children's attention when the momentum of conversation is at a high level actually maintains the minilesson's energy and engagement.



Keep Energy and Productivity High

TODAY, expect your kids will each write an entire nonfiction book. For that to be possible, make sure there are a limited number of lines on each page and a limited number of pages in the booklets you give to kids. It is far better for kids to come close to filling their pages, than for them to write on three out of twenty lines! The texts your kids are writing today are more like nonfiction picture books than chapter books—you'll see that the unit progresses toward chapter books, and it is best to avoid stealing the thunder from upcoming sessions.

During this bend, kids will write about a book a day, every other day, alternating with days for revision. Today you can expect that kids will probably smush stuff on several subtopics onto some of their pages, so you can begin immediately to teach them categorization—the concept of bucketing their information so like-information is slotted together. Don't, however, teach them to label each page as a different chapter. (That is the work of Bend II).

Your main goal is to encourage kids to write up a storm, writing in a way that is different from their narratives. Encourage kids to write on topics that they may not have

originally thought were interesting to others: sugary cereals, or the tricks that goalies use to protect the goal, or the traditions connected to the religious faith practiced by their families.

Because this is Day One of a new unit, you will probably not hold three-minute conferences with individuals. Instead, you may decide to circle the room, whispering in quick compliments and directions, making sure to keep your own volume low and their productivity high:

- *Give a thumbs up to a writer who seems to be staring into space.* "I can tell you're planning. Put it all down. Get started." Gently tap the paper and move away.
- *To a student who's dawdling.* "Are you giving that hand a rest? Let me see you flex those writing fingers. Great . . . pick up that pen."
- "It looks like you're writing a *story* about one moment you spent at the Yankees game. Remember this month you'll write information books in which you'll teach the reader. Decide: do you want to teach readers about the game of baseball or about the team, the Yankees?"
- "It looks like you are putting everything about your topic on this first page. How might you divide up all this information so that it goes across pages? Walk me through the pages."
- "You've got some spectacular sketches there. Can you touch each sketch and teach me as much as you can about that one sketch, then we'll go to the next?" Midway through this: "I gotta stop you. You've got to put this down."

MID-WORKSHOP TEACHING **Writers Reread to Add More Information by Asking, "What Else Can I Teach?"**

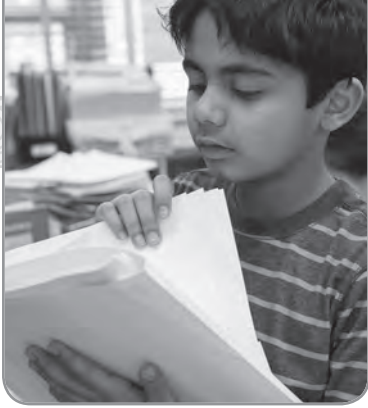
"Writers, eyes on me." When I had their attention, I said, "You're off to a solid start. I see many pens flying—but sometimes, I see kids stopping, staring off into the distance. Here's a tip for when you feel stuck. Ask yourself, 'What else can I teach?' Don't forget that you're an expert on your topic! You know a lot. Push yourself to put all that information onto the page. Get back to writing!"

SMALL GROUP

If some students have trouble generating topic ideas, then pull a quick small group.

To get ready, print the chart “Topics for Information Writing.” Have students bring their blank booklets to the rug. Set them up to work as partners. Tell the children why you gathered them for this small group: “Writers, I’ve gathered you because sometimes, when writers get stuck around topic choice, they reach out and talk to friends to jog their thinking.” Then, coach partners to use the chart to help each other generate some topics and to pick one. When a writer tentatively says, “Well, I could maybe write on . . .,” encourage partners to get behind that topic, endorsing it. “Yes! That’d be so great!” Once partners have topics, encourage them to open books and teach each other about their topic, touching each page as they rehearse.





SHARE

Writers Organize Ongoing and Finished Work

Set students up to organize their work, and then to tell a nearby kid what they learned about the difference between information books and stories.

“Writers, notice that I’m putting a box of your cleaned-out folders from the narrative unit onto each of your tables. Find your folder—it is now for your information writing—and put your book in it. Most of you have finished your book. If so, put it in the red dot side of your folder. If you still have a tiny bit of work to do before your book is done, where do you put the book?”

The kids chimed that it goes under the green dot, and I nodded. “As you do that, tell someone near you what you learned today about how information books are different than stories. Go!”



WORKING WITH ENLs

This session is already very supportive for ENLs:

- ◆ The process for writing an information book provides clear, actionable, and transferable steps (see “How to Write an Information Book” chart).
- ◆ The class book begun by the teacher and then continued by the students provides support for language, as well as learning the writing process. In particular, sketching images before writing can give every writer access.
- ◆ Oral rehearsal during the minilesson supports writers in listening and speaking the language of information writing.

To provide additional support for ENLs, you might:

- ◆ Use lots of gestures and an animated voice when referring to the steps on the “How to Write an Information Book” chart. Connect each action to a step on the chart.
- ◆ Encourage students who are doing lots of sketching to label their sketches. If necessary provide sentence starters like “This is a . . .” and “It is . . .”
- ◆ Allot additional time for students to orally rehearse their pages before they write.