

## Teachers College Reading and Writing Project Writing User's Guide, Grades 3-6, 2019-2020

# A User's Guide for *Up the Ladder*

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## Introduction

A single word lies at the heart of the three books in the *Up the Ladder: Accessing Grades 3-6 Units of Study* (Heinemann, 2017) series, and that word is *access*. These units are designed to give writers the skills, tools, and power to tackle the ambitious goals of grade-level *Units of Study in Narrative, Information, and Opinion Writing* (Heinemann, 2013).

The *Up the Ladder* narrative, information, and opinion units are designed to move students repeatedly through the writing process while rapidly accelerating their progress as writers. At the start of most of these units, you'll ask students to generate an idea and then draft in the course of a day, and then to spend a day or so revising that piece to make it stronger. The second day, you'll channel them to revise that piece, using a strategy you've taught them. On the third day, students will draft again, this time writing a slightly better piece because they'll have the revision strategy you taught them in mind from the get-go. Many bends of these units begin with this rapid cycle of generate/draft, and then revise. As the units progress, students will gradually spend more time revising their pieces. This helps students to build their stamina for revision and to gradually extend the amount of time they spend working productively on one piece.

A common question we get about *Up the Ladder* is, "Who are these units for?" Our answer: everyone! Access is for *everyone*, not just a single subpopulation of students. A common misconception is that these units are only for below benchmark writers. These units are for *all* writers. They are for writers who are newer to writing workshop instruction because they quickly bring them up to speed with writing workshop routines, partnerships, mentor texts, writing notebooks, and more. These units are for any proficient writer who could benefit from crystal clear tips for organizing and elaborating writing—and support doing so with a lot of volume and stamina. Then, too, the *Up the Ladder* units are for writers who are currently working at below benchmark levels in writing because the units help to accelerate those students' progress toward grade-level writing. They are also for writers for whom English is a new language.

The units are not only accessible for students, but also for teachers. *Up the Ladder* is for any teacher who may have cracked open a *Units of Study* series book, and took a peek at its complexity, length, and sky-high goals and thought, "Holy cow!" The series is also very accessible to a teacher who is new or newish to writing workshop, or is familiar with it but hasn't taught from the *Units of Study* for a spell, or worked closely with the Project in a while. We've streamlined the minilessons and provided video versions of minilessons you can watch to prepare, in order to make the unit feel easier to teach. Just as buildings are constructed with entrances and features that allow access for *all* people who enter, the *Up the Ladder Units* are accessible. They're for all writers, and all teachers. Access is for everyone.

You'll find that students come out of the units feeling accomplished and confident as writers, and that their writing skills are strengthened. You'll find that the units equip your kids with the skills they need to enter into and succeed with your grade-level writing units. And across the year, you'll likely find yourself revisiting strategies and charts you used in these units, repurposing them as part of conferring and small group work to help students succeed. How do we know? We know because thousands of teachers have



piloted and taught these units once (and in some cases, twice) already, and the response from teachers and students has been overwhelmingly positive.

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## Insights Gleaned From Other Teachers Who Have Taught This Unit/Special Concerns

### Paper Choice

While upper-grade units of study in the writing workshop channel students to use writer's notebooks (often a marble composition book), in the *Up the Ladder* series, you'll first guide students to write in booklets of 3 to 5 pages with varied line spacing. Paper choices encourage volume and stamina goals within a writer's zone of proximal development, and paper choices also allow for easy-to-access rehearsal: touching and saying what will be on each page, sketching a quick representation of what will be on each page, and then writing what will be on each page. Keep in mind that writer's notebooks are introduced at the end of the narrative *Up the Ladder* book, and so you will want to have them available to distribute to students by the end of that unit.

In the meantime, the rest of the narrative unit and the entirety of the information and opinion/argument unit will guide students to write across booklets of paper. Your paper choice conveys your expectations for students. If, in Session 1, you channel students to write a book with four pages and five lines on a page, you'll expect to see, by Session 8, students writing in books with eight or nine lines on a page—or more. If students' writing volume hasn't grown yet, you'll want to encourage students to write more lines and more pages in their third book than they did in Book 2 and then they did in Book 1.

This means you'll want your writing center to evolve as the unit goes on, as you introduce paper with more lines on a page and booklets with more pages in a book. You'll find a host of paper choices under the "General Information" category on the Digital Resources. A note of caution with paper choice: Session 12 in *Up the Ladder: Accessing Grades 3-6 Information Units* is designed to introduce four new paper choices to kids—compare and contrast, let me explain, parts/kinds/steps, and picture this paper. You'll want to save these paper choices for this session to make the reveal a big, exciting event for kids.

You and your colleagues might study student work within the units to get a sense of how paper choice and volume of writing might evolve. For instance, you could study p. 120-121 of *Up the Ladder: Accessing Grades 3-6 Information Units of Study*, noticing how Jenna's writing evolved from Bend I to Bend III. Then, study your students' writing and reflect on whether your students are making similar jumps as writers. After you study your student's writing, consider brainstorming goals with your students around paper choice to help them along the path of increasing their volume of writing.

### Registering for—and Making the Most of—the Digital Resources

The Up the Ladder units require a separate registration in order to access the digital resources on the Heinemann.com website. You'll find the code, as well as additional directions for how to access the materials, on page 7 of *A Guide to the Up the Ladder* series.

Teachers have found it helpful to preview the links in the digital resources much like we teach kids to preview a book: look at the parts and the contents, thinking what will be in each link, and clicking on several



to get a sense of what's available. Some teachers take ten minutes to download the digital resources into folders for quicker access. Whatever you decide to do, we recommend you spend a little more time than you usually would exploring the resources, so that you won't miss out on any goody therein (and there are a lot of goodies!).

For instance, in the *Up the Ladder* series, almost every Conferring and Small-Group section has a tool to go along with it. We encourage you to print the tool, or re-create it using large post-its to allow your students greater access to the helpful materials. Consider, too, your students' current ability to navigate those resources. Avoid simply handing out the materials to students. Teach students to use the tool first, of course.

Additionally, you'll want to check out the QR code videos that go along with each session. In the Getting Ready portion of each session, inside that gray box, you'll see a QR code. You'll want to download a QR reader app onto your phone or tablet (we recommend QR Reader), open the app, and hold your digital device over the QR code. The reader will automatically send you to a video link of a staff developer teaching that session's minilesson—and in many cases, teaching it for the first time! You'll see how the staff developer keeps the minilesson brief and clear, uses the digital resources, and models teaching the minilesson with the unit at hand. These videos have been enormously popular, and will give you a vision, literally, of how that session could go.

### Helping Kids to Generate Ideas

Especially if you teach students who are used to prompt-based writing, or if your students are used to being given topics to write about, you might need to put extra attention into helping kids generate ideas for their writing pieces. For instance, in narrative writing, you might teach kids that the trouble stories they generate can be extremely small moments of trouble—stubbing a toe, spilling a cup of milk, someone switching the TV from your favorite channel. You might do lots of oral storytelling of trouble stories from your own life (prioritizing trouble stories from when you were a child so that students can more closely relate to them). You might also incorporate more time for kids to share their stories with one another. Celebrate when kids “copy” the idea you modeled with. It's a natural scaffold to apprentice themselves to your writing.

In the information writing unit, you'll want to lean on the Session 1 chart in the Share that supports topic generation: Topics for Information Writing. This chart helps crack open what kids might write about—hobbies, pop culture, sports, places they know, you name it! Students are experts at so many different things; we just have to help them see what they are experts on and then hold those items in high regard. Teachers and students have found this chart to be one of the most popular and helpful tools in the entire series.

In the opinion writing unit, you'll want to put energy in Bend I towards helping students generate a whole host of opinions about collections. In addition to giving a “Best Of” award, teach them that they can also reward a second best, worst, funniest, cutest, and so on. Kids can even have opinions about other people's collections!

### Teaching the Units for a Second Time

Many schools who used the *Up the Ladder* units taught the units across grade levels the first year, with third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers all teaching the same units. If your school followed this model, you'll need to decide whether or not you'll teach the *Up the Ladder* units again to students the subsequent year. When you study your incoming students' on-demand assessments, you might find a reason that makes you consider starting in the grade-level units of study: your students' writing abilities have improved significantly, students understand the routines, or students' volume increased. Or, you might find that even



though your students have strong skills as narrative writers, their opinion writing skills need some shoring up. You might decide to just revisit that *Up the Ladder* unit or to only revisit parts of units.

If you plan to teach any of the units to the same students for a second time, you'll want to think about the ways in which you can help students to make their work more sophisticated on their second go around. For instance, if you are teaching the narrative unit to a group of kids who know it, you might encourage kids to begin the unit in a writing notebook. They can sketch at the top or side margins of each page, and can write the arc of the story at the top of each page. Then, too, you may decide to stick with booklets as a way to focus on rapid generating ideas, drafting, and revision. You might also encourage students to write within a small moment in Bend I, as opposed to waiting until the end of the unit in Bend III.

Also, if you are teaching the information unit again, you might say to kids, "You did this work last year as information writers. As you enter this unit again, will you think, 'How am I going to outgrow myself?' Will I push myself around topic choice? Elaboration? Organization? Engaging the reader?" You might decide to significantly shorten Bend I, condensing the sessions into three days where you channel students to rehearse, draft, and revise within that time. Then, you could move into Bends II and III, making tweaks to the unit to support students' big goals.

Additionally, for students who have already experienced the *Up the Ladder: Accessing Grades 3-6, Opinion* unit, you might decide to skip Bends I and II and move directly into Bends III and IV. For Bend IV, you'd likely want to substitute in another topic for bottled water, since students will already be familiar with that issue and the corresponding text set. For instance, you could substitute zoos in for the topic of bottled water. If you choose to revise Bend IV, you'll need to create a speech to use in the first session of the bend that is similar in structure (and flaws) to the speech on plastic water bottles. You'll also need to find three articles kids can read on the topic you choose. If you have the grade 5 reading units of study, you'll find the text sets in *Argument and Advocacy* will be especially helpful.

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## Accessing Narrative Units of Study

The *Up the Ladder* narrative unit is a foundational unit that's designed to help you begin your year in writing workshop. It not only supports students as they get ready for the other narrative *Unit of Study* units, it also helps students get ready for the other *Up the Ladder* units as well as the *Units of Study* units in information and opinion/argument writing. In other words, narrative is the foundation for all other writing, and the *Up the Ladder* narrative book is most supportive in that regard.

In Bend I, you'll channel students to generate a bunch of "trouble stories," that is, stories about times when students faced trouble, got in trouble, or witnessed trouble (Session 1). Some teachers have had the misconception that "trouble stories" means telling kids to write only about times when students got into trouble, making teachers uneasy about stories that glorify tomfoolery. Although we are strong believers that students should have the agency to write about *anything* they choose to write about (within good taste and reason), we are not suggesting simply channeling students to write about bad behavior (even if it may be the kind of writing that might open doors for your most reluctant writers). We suggest you encourage students to write about troubles big and small: stepping in dog poop, death of a pet goldfish, or sneaking cookies, etc.

The reason the unit encourages you to help students generate ideas for trouble stories is that it sets the stage for the basic organization of every story: the trouble starts, the trouble gets worse, and then the trouble ends



(Session 3). This session is incredibly important as it helps students actualize a story's inherent structure, which research by Alan Kamhi and Hugh Catts has strongly suggested supports students not only in writing, but also in reading.

Bend I helps not only with organization, but also with elaboration. You'll teach writers to use storytelling to elaborate (Session 2), as well as ways to use drama to show characters moving and talking (Session 4). Each and every bend has at least one session on grammar and conventions, and you'll find that bend one focuses on end punctuation (Session 5).

The first four sessions follow the structure: generate and draft, then revise. This same structure is repeated in all three *Up the Ladder* books, so you'll want students to get the hang of it right away. Keep the pace brisk so students get a feel for it. There is no need to bog down the units by spending two days on a session. The writing should be approximated, full of taped-in flaps and post-its and flags that show revision—not a polished piece—and by the end of the unit you'll see dramatic progress.

Another habit you'll want to solidify in this bend (and in the next) is the habit of orally rehearsing, sketching, and then writing. This is a process you'll harness throughout all three books, and so it is important that students are familiar with it now. Teachers and students have found this process, which in the narrative unit is called "touch and tell, sketch then write," to be incredibly helpful. This process reduces the cognitive load of the story elements (makes it easier), so students can focus on one aspect of writing at one time, before they become more fluent and automatic with it. Remember that the celebration in this bend might be the first time students will get a chance to revel in the work they've accomplished. Positive feedback is powerful, and you'll also want to keep the momentum going. The celebrations at the end of the first two bends are not intended be big showcases, but brief and extraordinarily positive affairs.

Bend II essentially mimics Bend I in structure, alternating between generating and drafting with revision, except that this bend focuses on realistic fiction. We know we're preaching to the choir here, but students *love* to write realistic fiction. The biggest tip we have for you in this bend is that you encourage the realistic fiction to be just that: realistic. Characters should have real and important problems (Session 7). It helps to channels students to create characters who are their same age.

Also in the second bend, you lift the level of revision skills. You'll channel students to draft several endings to a story, choosing the best one (Session 8), and you'll teach them to bring out the secret thoughts and quirky feelings of their fictional characters (Session 10), which has been a favorite among teachers. While Bend II supports all grades in narrative writing in strong and heady ways, this bend is particularly supportive for 4th grade students, whose first narrative unit is realistic fiction, a unit many teachers find highly ambitious for kids. At the end of Bend II, you'll notice students taking pride in themselves as writers. One effective way to allow students to voice parts of their writing that they are particularly proud of is through a "symphony share." You might give students a chance to share whole group, or you might separate students into two groups and have them share with each other. Regardless, you'll be highlighting the writerly identity that students will begin taking on in this bend, which will carry over to the next.

Bend III is the stepstone between accessible writing process to the traditional writing workshop in the upper grades. In this bend, you introduce the writing notebook to students (Session 13), an important tool they'll use in all writing workshops. You'll also teach students to write small moments (Session 14), which is at the heart of not only narrative units of study, but also the information and opinion/argument units of study as well. Bend III is in some ways essential for all grades, 3rd through 6th, but it is specifically helpful for 3rd, 5th, and 6th grades, as each of those grades begins with small moment, personal narrative writing. While you could consider repeating one of the celebrations from Bends I or II, you might also give students a chance to decorate their writer's notebook, as is outlined in the write-up for the session. This notebook will be a tool they use again and again across the units, and you'll want to spend the time now to get students



invested. Provide students with pictures, magazines, and book order forms so students have a bunch of materials to draw from.

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## Accessing Information Units of Study

The *Up the Ladder* information unit is designed to get kids writing up a storm, moving from all-about books on topics of personal expertise to books that are more carefully structured and filled with elaboration. This unit gets kids ready to take on the grade-level units in information writing, including units that prioritize incorporating historical research.

In Bend I, students write at least three information books over the course of eight days, if not more. These are “all about” books. Some students might have ideas of how to structure books that are more sophisticated, but don’t worry if the books feel unorganized at this point. That will be the major work of Bend II. Instead, this bend emphasizes that kids should teach a lot about nonfiction topics on which they are experts. They’ll learn to elaborate using different strategies, such as answering who, what, where, and when questions or including exact names, dates, colors, etc. to make their writing stronger.

You’ll coach students to write books about topics on which they are experts. Lean on the one-day chart in Session 1, Topics for Information Writing, to help kids generate a whole host of things they know about. See *Insights Gleaned* for additional information about supporting topic generating.

Across Bend I, students will cycle quickly through the writing process. They’ll draft one day, revise the next day, and then repeat that process three times, eventually doing a bit of editing and celebrating near the end of the bend. As students draft their second, third, and fourth books, expect these books will be a little bit better because kids will have all the revision strategies you taught them earlier in mind as they draft. For instance, once students know that writers elaborate by including specific details, they don’t need to wait until revision to add those specific details in. Instead, they can include those details from the get go! As this bend culminates, you’ll want to take a little time for celebration. We suggest you have kids watch a TED talk to illustrate how experts speak to an audience, and then use that as inspiration to teach one another.

We think you’ll find the editing sessions across all three bends incredibly helpful. They offer concrete strategies for helping kids edit for run-on sentences (Session 7), for paragraphs (Session 13), and for deliberate punctuation choices (Session 19).

In Bend II, students will begin to write informational chapter books. They’ll continue to write about topics of personal expertise. Whereas before, kids were writing fast and furious, cycling through the writing process quickly, in Bend II, you’ll slow the process down. You’ll coach students to choose a topic, organize their book into chapters, and spend several days developing the book.

Your major focus in Bend II will be teaching students how to organize their book into chapters and then organize the information within those chapters. You’ll want to see kids writing more lines on a page and more pages in a book than they were before. Study Jacob’s work on p. 4-5 as an example. Notice how Jacob wrote 3-4 page books in Bend I and is writing 9-15 page books by Bend II. To celebrate the tremendous growth your students have made, you might hold a gallery walk. Invite them to give feedback to each other about how much they’ve grown as writers. They could even put out a Bend I and Bend II book to visually showcase their growth.



Bend III is an especially exciting one. You'll channel students to take one of the books they wrote fast and furious in Bend I and to rethink that book, using all they've learned in Bends I and II to make that book so much better. They'll do this with greater independence and sophistication. Students will incorporate their own thinking into their books, weaving that thinking alongside their facts, and they'll study mentor texts to get additional ideas for how to strengthen their writing. As the unit ends, you'll invite students to fancy up their book to prepare for a celebration. The final session lists many options for how this celebration could go. Look on the Units of Study in Writing TCRWP Facebook Group for other ways classes have celebrated.

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## Accessing Opinion Units of Study

The opinion unit helps students dramatically lift the level of their opinion writing skills, so they are ready to enter grade-level units of study around personal essay, persuasive essay/speech writing, literary essay, and research-based argument essay writing.

Across Bend I, students learn to state an opinion about a collection, their claim, and to back that claim up with a reason or two. As the bend launches, you'll invite students to bring in collections of related objects from their homes (Pokémon cards, action figures, stuffed cats, chapsticks, etc.), and you'll teach them how to judge and evaluate those collections. Expect students to write a volume of pieces across this bend, as they try out different opinions about their collection. Right from the start, students will revise in large-scale ways, making big physical revisions with post-it notes and revision strips (Session 4).

To celebrate, we suggest that Bend I culminate with a mini Kids' Choice Awards celebration, complete with a red carpet. We've found that the mini red carpet celebration is a real motivator. It gives kids a chance to glory in what has happened so far, and it fills them with energy for the work to come.

In Bend II, students will move from rating collections to reviewing things in the world: restaurants, movies, books, and more. Students' major work in this bend is to state a claim, support it with multiple reasons, and back each reason up with an example. Students will write several pieces, and you'll want to see students' paper choices become evidence of how they can write longer across the bend.

This work is more abstract for students than studying a collection that was laid out in front of them. To provide additional support, you might bring in covers of books or movies or pictures of restaurants or places that kids are reviewing. That way, they can use the visuals to generate ideas. Pay special attention to the student work in Session 9. Several of the reviews there are negative, and creating negative reviews can fill students with a lot of energy for their writing. For the celebration, you might invite students to create a mini Zagat-style guide, where they gather all their reviews related to a topic together (e.g. all the restaurant reviews, all the book reviews) and create collections that could help other people in the community.

Bend III offers a chance to return to the work of claims, reasons, and examples. You'll invite students to think about important changes they could make in their school or communities and to write speeches that advocate for those changes. This bend begins with a non-traditional session, a bootcamp (Session 13). In this session, you'll coach students through the entire process of writing a piece with beginning essay structure in a day. Students will orally rehearse an essay before heading off to draft it, fast and furious, in 10 minutes.

Across the rest of the bend, students will work on one piece, a change from previous bends when they wrote several shorter pieces. The next day, you'll return to the work of supporting a claim with reasons and



evidence, but you'll do so in an incredibly supportive way. Session 14 teaches students that a claim is like the trunk of a tree, reasons are similar to branches, and examples/evidence are the tiny twigs. Using the metaphor and acting out how the different parts of an essay differ from and relate to one another can be transformational for kids. Another day, you'll provide students with booklets to help them lay out their claims and reasons and collect evidence.

If you haven't been watching the videotaped minilesson demonstrations, available in each session via QR code, you'll want to be sure to watch session 16. Notice the way Alissa rehearses and then immediately writes to help her drafting get better. After Bend III, third and fourth grade teachers will find that students are ready to enter grade-level opinion units, including *Boxes and Bullets* and *Changing the World*. If you teach fifth or sixth grades, and you plan to teach a research-based argument essay writing unit, you'll want to move into Bend IV.

In Bend IV, students learn to create opinion pieces with text-based evidence. We suggest you channel students to study a shared topic—in this case, plastic water bottles, and to create speeches about this topic. The major goal of this bend is to give students experience with incorporating text-based evidence into their writing. They learn to set up their evidence a bit, and then follow the evidence with a bit about why that evidence matters. Of course, students won't master the work of using text-based evidence during this time, but this work will help to prepare them for *Research-Based Argument Essay*.

