Unit 2--Research-Based Informative Writing

Content Area: **English Language Arts**
Course(s): **English Language Arts**
Time Period: **Marking Period 2**
Length: **6 to 8 weeks**
Status: **Published**

Unit Overview

As reading lessons begin to take on nonfiction topics, students will take a new direction in their writing, choosing topics on which they will relate factual information based on research that they carry out themselves. Students will learn and apply various organizational structures for their essays, such as sequence of events, comparison and contrast, problem and solution, and cause and effect. More advanced and ambitious students may even attempt to synthesize their own structure based on one or more of these. Students will draft both handwritten pieces as well as pieces using appropriate technology.

This year's informative writing unit will stress the importance of evidence and attribution. Students will also develop an understanding of what makes sources reliable and authoritative. Additionally, students will understand that sources merely provide fragmentary facts; it is up to a writer to add his or her own synthesis in order to give body and continuity to the written piece.

The Reading and Writing Project's "Historical Documentaries" unit is listed as a resource for this portion of the writing curriculum and provides for some students a valuable cross-curricular connection to social studies. Teachers may, however, provide instruction on other informative writing genres (biography, problem/solution, cause and effect, etc.) based on topics that students choose.

Standards

LA.W.7.2	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.
LA.W.7.2.A	Introduce a topic clearly, previewing what is to follow; organize ideas, concepts, and information, using text structures (e.g., definition, classification, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, etc.) and text features (e.g., headings, graphics, and multimedia).
LA.W.7.2.B	Develop the topic with relevant facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples.
LA.W.7.2.C	Use appropriate transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts.
LA.W.7.2.D	Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.
LA.W.7.2.E	Establish and maintain a formal style academic style, approach, and form.
LA.W.7.2.F	Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented.
LA.W.7.4	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, voice and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for

	writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)
LA.W.7.5	With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.
LA.W.7.6	Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and link to and cite sources as well as to interact and collaborate with others, including linking to and citing sources.
LA.W.7.7	Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation.
LA.W.7.8	Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.
LA.W.7.10	Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, metacognition/self correction, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.
LA.SL.7.1	Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
LA.SL.7.1.B	Follow rules for collegial discussions, track progress toward specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.
LA.SL.7.1.D	Acknowledge new information expressed by others and, when warranted, modify their own views.
LA.SL.7.2	Analyze the main ideas and supporting details presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how the ideas clarify a topic, text, or issue under study.
LA.SL.7.4	Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with pertinent descriptions, facts, details, and examples; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.
LA.SL.7.5	Include multimedia components and visual displays in presentations to clarify claims and findings and emphasize salient points.
LA.SL.7.6	Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.
LA.L.7.1	Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
LA.L.7.1.B	Choose among simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences to signal differing relationships among ideas.
LA.L.7.1.C	Place phrases and clauses within a sentence, recognizing and correcting misplaced and dangling modifiers.
LA.L.7.2	Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.
LA.L.7.2.A	Use a comma to separate coordinate adjectives (e.g., It was a fascinating, enjoyable movie but not He wore an old[,] green shirt).
LA.L.7.2.B	Spell correctly.
LA.L.7.3.A	Choose language that expresses ideas precisely and concisely, recognizing and eliminating wordiness and redundancy.
LA.L.7.6	Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific words and phrases; gather vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

Essential Questions

1. After evaluating my previous experiences in writing informative essays, what goals should I set for myself in terms of my topic's depth, choosing the best sources for my research, and generating my own ideas and conclusions from research?
2. How do I develop a thesis statement based on my research question or topic?
3. What kinds of sources command the most respect and trust from my readers?
4. How should I organize my essay in order to support my thesis statement consistently and present information coherently?
5. Which conventions and habits define informative writing--and which habits should I avoid?
6. How and why should I make use of my skills, resources, peers, and teacher as my work takes shape?

How can we write an informational text in such a way that we examine an angle to a historical account, gather and incorporate research that supports that angle, and create a documentary that conveys and analyzes the information in a compelling way through the use of words, images and sound?

Bend I: *How can I decide on an angle that captures an important idea about a historical event or era?*

Bend II: *How can I draft a documentary script that accurately depicts the historical time period I'm writing about, and also move my viewers with compelling stories?*

Bend III: *How can I use technology to bring together a multi-media presentation that gets across the stories, information and emotions that I most want to convey about this time period?*

Application of Knowledge: Students will know that...

- All information and ideas taken from sources must be attributed—even if the information is paraphrased.
- Basic skills such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation apply to all writing.
- Clear and coherent writing illustrates development, organization, and style that are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Conferences are two-way discussions whose frank interchange of ideas facilitates good writing.
- Coordinate commas before a noun require commas to separate them.
- Daily practice in writing is essential for development of skills and enjoyment.
- Sources of information have potential biases and varying degrees of credibility and authority.
- The research process gains significant momentum when a researcher formulates a research question from the topic.

- Writing is a process that unfolds over time, beginning with ideas, taking refinement over several drafts, and improving with inspiration from outside texts as well as with consultations with peers and teachers.

Application of Skills: Students will be able to...

- Apply the basic skills of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation properly to their writing.
- Assist and receive assistance from peers in developing ideas, writing, revising, and editing.
- Attribute information presented in writing back to its source.
- Complete at least the final phase of their work using digital and cloud capabilities and produce final products in digital form.
- Compose a thorough, organized research-based essay that conveys facts and ideas and attributes research back to its sources.
- Evaluate the authority of a source of information and assess the source for bias.
- Find information from print and online sources.
- Include a clear introduction, an ample body, and a thorough conclusion in an essay.
- Include pertinent facts and add their own appropriate analysis and synthesis to their topics.
- Observe formal writing conventions, suiting vocabulary and tone to an academic audience.
- Participate in meaningful peer and teacher conferences, providing and evaluating advice and applying it as appropriate.
- Spell, capitalize, and punctuate correctly.
- Use a research question as the basis for investigation, research, articulation of a thesis, and composition of an essay.
- Use appropriate transitions to optimize continuity.
- Use commas to separate coordinate adjectives before a noun.
- Write on a daily basis toward the completion of an extended research-based project.

Teaching Points and Suggested Activities

The following teaching points and activities are adapted from the "Historical Documentary" unit in *Units of Study in Argument, Information and Narrative Writing, Grades 6-8* (Calkins et al., 2014) and serve as a resource for teachers.

Historical Documentaries: Sharing Stories Worth Telling

In this unit, students will lean on what they know about informational writing and parlay those skills into writing a historical documentary. Writing historical documentaries integrates many of the important literacy skills students have practiced across the year, including using primary and secondary sources, pairing research with analysis, and communicating with clear and specific language. To build on students' expertise, this documentaries unit channels them to consider ways to organize their writing using a variety of structures such as compare/contrast and pro/con. The unit's flexible structure allows teachers to make choices that best match the needs, interests, and readiness of their particular group of student writers.

One possible way teachers can approach this unit is the challenge students to write a digital information book in which they take on a historical topic (i.e., the Salem witch trials) and draft a script containing segments (like chapters) that explore different parts of the topic and present it in documentary form.

Students are also invited to explore ways to incorporate other text types in addition to the standard "all-about" type typically associated with information writing. Students might include essays or narratives; one section might be an interview with an expert presenting an argument about the causes of the American Revolution based on her years of research; another might be the story of Paul Revere and William Dawes risking their lives to alert the countryside of the imminent arrival of British troops.

One possible final vision is for students to collaboratively create a short historical documentary about a topic using video-editing software, such as iMovie. Another option is to have students publish an analog historical documentary in the form of a physical informational book. Whether teachers decide to publish digitally or in print, students will still receive the rich opportunity to write about historical topics in compelling ways.

Teaching Points:

Bend I: Building Your Vision as a Documentarian: Finding an Angle on a Historical Event or Era *(or alternate topic)*

Studying Mentors: Becoming Familiar with Documentaries as a Genre

- Each documentarian has a point of view and conveys specific ideas or angles of his subject.

Collecting Entries on Possible Topics and Experimenting with Structure

- Historical documentarians use strategies to generate ideas for topics that are similar to generating ideas for any kind of writing. One thing they do is collect entries in their writer's notebooks, writing long to capture all they know about several topics. Then, they choose the topic that feels the best.

Selecting a Historical Topic and Using a Variety of Structures to Plan Chapters or Segments

- Writers explore different structures for the segments or chapters of their historical documentaries. Some of these might include boxes (a broad category of information) and bullets (details that fit), cause and effect, pros and cons, and similarities and differences. Doing this work helps writers to consider the most effective way of delivering information to their audience.

Bend II: Drafting & Revision Scripts: Writing to Preserve History & Tell Compelling Stories

Creating a Rough Draft of a Script with Sections or Chapters

- Planning for segments in historical documentaries is very similar to planning chapters in an information book. Writers consider how to organize the segment to best teach readers, perhaps considering dividing the segment into parts or kinds or chronological order or perhaps a combination of those.

Incorporating Research into Historical Documentary Scripts

- Writers make decisions about what kind of research to gather, which sources to use to find it, and where in their pieces the information will go.

Revising Scripts for Structure, Accuracy, and Cohesion

- Writers make connections within and across the categories of information in their texts, making sure it is clear how one section connects to the next (and to the overall text).

Optional Publication Method:

Bend III: Digital Storytelling: Weaving Together Images, Sound & Script through Storyboards & Digital Publishing

- Storyboarding to Incorporate Digital Elements
- Putting It All Together: Digital Production and the Editing Room
- Celebration: Screening Documentaries, Tribeca Film Festival Style

"Historical Documentary." *Units of Study in Argument, Information and Narrative Writing, Grade 7.* Lucy Calkins, TCRWP

Alternate Teaching Points:

- Writers of informational essays use many different strategies to convey information to the reader, including cause and effect, definition, compare and contrast, and classification. A chronological structure provides summaries and descriptions of a significant event's key moments in the order in which they occurred.

- Writers examine pieces by other writers to learn about informational essay strategies. Writers use a chronological structure in informational essays to show how one moment followed and even led to another in creating what became a significant event. Summary and descriptive writing about key moments makes that chronological relationship clear.

- Writers usually produce their best writing when focused on a topic they care about. They brainstorm and pre-write to identify and explore possible topics, then carefully select a topic based on their

interests and the assignment.

- Writers develop research questions to focus their investigation of a topic. These questions should be open-ended and require research and considerable thinking to answer.

- Writers perform research to increase their knowledge of the chosen topic. They sort through their prior knowledge and research information, categorizing facts, details, quotations, and examples into categories and sub-categories.

- Writers determine a central idea to focus the drafting of their essay. In an essay focused on chronology, the central idea will point to the key moments in an historical event and state why these moments were so important.

- Informational essay writers select key facts, details, quotations, and examples to support the central idea in the topic sentence as they draft body paragraphs. They also analyze this information to help the audience make sense of the facts and link them to the central idea.

- Writers of informational essays select a logical structure for their piece as they draft. With the chronological pattern, the key moments are discussed in the order in which they happened. Within the paragraphs of a chronological account, writers organize summary, description, and analysis to have the greatest impact on the reader. Writers use transitions within and between paragraphs to help readers understand the logical flow of ideas.

- Informational essay writers select, or craft, and carefully place pictures, graphs, charts, and headings and sub-headings to help the reader visually understand their central and supporting ideas.

- Informational essay writers craft introductory and concluding paragraphs that make clear to the reader the importance of the topic. With the chronological structure, the concluding paragraph discusses how the historical event affected the culture or future events.

- When they have completed a draft of their essay, informational essay writers may engage in peer review to get feedback on their writing. They may also use a reverse outline to determine the effectiveness of their piece. Using all this information, they formulate a revision plan, and then make changes accordingly.

- To complete the writing process, writers must share their pieces with an audience—either in print or on the web—and then celebrate the accomplishment of completing a significant writing task. They then reflect on the writing process to become more independent writers in the future.

The following teaching topics address the objectives of this unit, as well as the standards in the Common Core:

- Generating ideas for research topics--your interests and the audience's
- Developing a research question based on a research topic
- Gathering information and assessing the reliability and authority of sources
- Sources from multiple media: print, digital, and broadcast
- Developing a thesis statement
- Introduction, body, conclusion, and transitions
- Text structure (description, sequence of events, comparison/contrast, cause and effect, problem and solution, hybrids)
- Writing conventions and style guidelines (basic skills--spelling, capitalization, and punctuation;

advanced skills--habits to strengthen, habits to avoid)
- Integrating research into your writing--then adding your own ideas
- Using commas to separate coordinate adjectives
- Attribution, citation, and listing sources
- Priorities for peer conferences
- Digital and cloud resources for composing, revising, editing, and publishing

Typical Daily Activities

- Mini-lesson (connection, teaching point, modeling, active engagement, independent practice, sharing)
- Daily writing
- Conferences (between peers and with the teacher) and sharing

Critical Phases of Student Activity

- Developing topics
- Research
- Drafting
- Revising
- Editing
- Publishing

Assessments

Assessment in this unit takes three forms: diagnostic, formative, and summative. Assessment rubrics are available in Lucy Calkins's Reading and Writing Project resource kits, but teachers may also develop their own rubrics in order to include more specific elements of knowledge and skills listed in this unit summary.

Additionally, student self-assessment and peer assessment should take place whenever possible--again, in all three forms: diagnostic, formative, and summative. Removing the traditional emphasis on teacher assessment enables students to take more initiative and become self-directed.

Also, whenever possible, teacher assessment should take place in the context of a conference, or at least be followed up by a conference. This reinforces expectations, advice, assistance, and ultimately, growth.

<u>Diagnostic Assessments</u>

Review of student's portfolio from the previous school year, particularly informative writing projects

On-demand informative essay (E.g: "Think of a topic that you've studied or that you know a lot about. Tomorrow, you will have forty-five minutes to write an information (or all-about) text that teachers others interesting and important information and ideas about that topic. If you want to find and use information from a book or another outside source to help you with this writing, you may bring that with you tomorrow. Please keep in mind that you'll have only forty-five minutes to complete this, so you'll need to plan, draft, revise, and edit in one sitting. Write in a way that shows all that you know about information writing. In your writing, make sure you: write an introduction, elaborate with a variety of information, organize your writing, use transition words, and write a conclusion." - Taken from *Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, 6-8*)

Formative Assessments (Informal)

Daily observation of students' participation and products during the active participation segment of each mini-lesson.

Students' questions, comments, suggestions to teacher

Comments, corrections, and records from peer conferences between students

Formative Assessments (Formal)

Teacher-student conferences

Summative Assessment

Summative writing will take the form of both handwritten pieces and pieces generated using appropriate technology.

Published research-based informative pieces

On-demand informative pieces (Same on-demand prompt as for the diagnostic assessment)

Activities to Differentiate Instruction

The Writing Workshop framework enables students to generate research topics based on their own interests and experiences. The inherently self-directed nature of developing initial concepts requires continual reinforcement, however, at all phases of instruction during the unit.

This particular unit on research-based writing also enables students--based on interest and ability--to choose in consultation with their teachers from a range of approaches to organizing their pieces. Struggling students may choose more basic structures such as a sequence of events or analysis by comparison and contrast.

Teachers will encourage other students to examine causes and effects; highly imaginative students may require advice and guidance as the depth of their work transcends the typical understanding of text structure. All students will learn the nuances of verb voice and mood.

The active participation component of mini-lessons enables a teacher to move around and observe students at work on concepts and strategies that were presented in a whole-class format. The teacher can intervene at his or her discretion.

Likewise, a sharing component of many lessons will allow for a sampling of work from multiple students. A greater flow of ideas and products brings about a more thorough appeal to the individual dispositions and learning styles of students listening. Also, this unit will culminate in a publishing/celebrating day on which students put their individual skills and products on display.

Supplementing this, multiple exemplar texts in varying styles will broaden the appeal and accessibility of the knowledge and skills students are developing.

Due to those varying dispositions and learning styles, teachers promote various strategies during all phases of the writing process. Students will have opportunities to work alone, in pairs, and in groups. They will choose either to compose in a traditional pen-on-paper mode or to compose, revise, edit, and publish digitally.

Conferences also provide a critical opportunity for students to receive individual attention and instruction. Small-group conferences with a teacher will allow for a diverse mix of ideas and advice that students can apply to their work whether it was specifically given to them or not, and the discussion is often easier to follow and takes place in closer proximity to individual students than whole-class instruction. Of course, at several stages in the writing process, the teacher will hold conferences with individual students for formative and summative purposes.

In compliance with 504 plans and IEP's, teachers will review applicable documents, consult appropriate personnel connected with special-needs students' cases, work closely with inclusion teachers and classroom aides, and communicate with parents in an effort to see to the specific needs of all students.

In some cases, most often in GATE classes, teachers may elect to have students compile their research-based informative pieces into a true publication. Such an undertaking is highly compatible with the Writer's Project unit on investigative journalism and will require many individual students to work in specialized capacities such as copy editors, section editors, editors-in-chief, and layout and design specialists. Over several instructional units, additional students will serve as archivists.

Integrated/Cross-Disciplinary Instruction

Consistent with the concept of differentiated instruction, students should learn the knowledge and skills of this unit in conjunction with concepts from various content areas. The topics and research questions for informative writing span far beyond the middle school curriculum. Here are some possible research questions and the content areas to which they apply:

- Who came up with a music notation system and why? (music, social studies)
- What can the pyramids teach us about math? (STEM, social studies)
- Why is Pluto no longer considered a true planet? (science)
- How did Walt Disney change entertainment forever? (social studies, performing and visual arts)
- How did Henry Ford make the automobile so common and popular? (social studies)

While some teachers will provide instruction that includes specific concepts from various content areas, all should direct students to specific text and online resources pertinent to various content areas. Also, teachers will consult grade-level content area teachers on concepts covered in their classes, allowing subjects, lessons, and experiences to reinforce each other.

Suggested Mentor Texts and Other Resources

Possible Mentor Texts Sources:

The Ken Burns Effect: Documentary filmmaker, Ken Burns, talks about the techniques that make up his signature style. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeqlHmhio4s&feature=youtu.be

Digital High Interest Nonfiction Text Sets from TCRWP:

http://readingandwritingproject.com/public/themes/rwproject/resources/booklists/nonfiction%20sets/High_interest_nonfiction_sets_-_edit.pdf

Digital Middle School Nonfiction Text Sets from TCRWP:

http://readingandwritingproject.com/public/themes/rwproject/resources/booklists/nonfiction%20sets/Middle_School_Nonfiction_Text_Sets.pdf

Other Nonfiction Resources

- http://www.history.com

- http://www.smithsonianmag.com/
- http://www.teenink.com/nonfiction/academic/top/
- http://scope.scholastic.com/
- http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/
- http://www.timeforkids.com/
- http://www.cnn.com/studentnews/
- http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/
- http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngexplorer/
- http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/kidspost/
- http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/
- http://video.pbs.org/
- http://headlinespot.com/for/kids/
- http://tweentribune.com/frontpage?link
- http://www.highlightskids.com/articles
- https://www.dogonews.com/grade_tag/grades-5-8
- http://teachingkidsnews.com/

Resources:

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. Modern Language Association, 2009.

MLA website (www.mla.org)

"Style Guidelines for Formal Essays." A resource composed by GBMS ELA teachers and distributed to students.

Purdue University Online Writing Lab (owl.english.purdue.edu)

Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing:

- "Historical Documentary." *Units of Study in Argument, Information and Narrative Writing, Grade 7.* Lucy Calkins, TCRWP
- *A Guide to the Common Core Writing Workshop, Intermediate Grades*. Lucy Calkins, TCRWP
- *Writing Pathways, Grades K-8, Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions*. Lucy Calkins, TCRWP
- *If...Then... Curriculum*, Grade 7 (Assessment-Based Instruction). Lucy Calkins, TCRWP
- *Resources for Teaching Writing* (DVD). Lucy Calkins, TCRWP

For teachers interested in digital publishing, *Stories Worth Telling A Guide to Creating Student-Led Documentaries* provides an overview of the process:

http://www.apple.com/education/docs/Documentary_Guide_10-09.pdf

21st Century Skills

CRP.K-12.CRP2.1	Career-ready individuals readily access and use the knowledge and skills acquired through experience and education to be more productive. They make connections between abstract concepts with real-world applications, and they make correct insights about when it is appropriate to apply the use of an academic skill in a workplace situation.
CRP.K-12.CRP4.1	Career-ready individuals communicate thoughts, ideas, and action plans with clarity, whether using written, verbal, and/or visual methods. They communicate in the workplace with clarity and purpose to make maximum use of their own and others' time. They are excellent writers; they master conventions, word choice, and organization, and use effective tone and presentation skills to articulate ideas. They are skilled at interacting with others; they are active listeners and speak clearly and with purpose. Career-ready individuals think about the audience for their communication and prepare accordingly to ensure the desired outcome.
CRP.K-12.CRP11.1	Career-ready individuals find and maximize the productive value of existing and new technology to accomplish workplace tasks and solve workplace problems. They are flexible and adaptive in acquiring new technology. They are proficient with ubiquitous technology applications. They understand the inherent risks-personal and organizational-of technology applications, and they take actions to prevent or mitigate these risks.