# 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.

The eighth grade research-based writing unit is an extension from a similar unit from grade 7. In that unit, students learned the importance of attribution (i.e., avoiding plagiarism) and the need to draw information from reliable sources. This year's unit extends these concepts, prompting students to choose not only reliable but authoritative sources. 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.

## Standards

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| LA.W.8.2 | 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.8.2.A | Introduce a topic and 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.8.2.B | Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples. |
| LA.W.8.2.C | Use appropriate and varied transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts. |
| LA.W.8.2.D | Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic. |
| LA.W.8.2.E | Establish and maintain a formal style/academic style, approach, and form. |
| LA.W.8.2.F | Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented. |
| LA.W.8.4 | 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.8.5 | 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. |

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| LA.W.8.6 | Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others. |
| LA.W.8.7 | Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration. |
| LA.W.8.8 | 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.8.10 | 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.8.1 | Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. |
| LA.SL.8.1.B | Follow rules for collegial discussions and decision-making, track progress toward specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed. |
| LA.SL.8.1.D | Acknowledge new information expressed by others, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views in light of the evidence presented. |
| LA.SL.8.2 | Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation. |
| LA.SL.8.4 | Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning, and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation. |
| LA.SL.8.5 | Integrate multimedia and visual displays into presentations to clarify information, strengthen claims and evidence, and add interest. |
| LA.SL.8.6 | Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. |
| LA.L.8.1 | Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking. |
| LA.L.8.1.B | Form and use verbs in the active and passive voice. |
| LA.L.8.1.D | Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in verb voice and mood. |
| LA.L.8.2 | Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing. |
| LA.L.8.2.B | Use an ellipsis to indicate an omission. |
| LA.L.8.2.C | Spell correctly. |
| LA.L.8.6 | 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. |
| LA.8.L.8.3 | Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening. Use verbs in the active and passive voice and in the conditional and subjunctive mood to achieve particular effects (e.g., emphasizing the actor or the action; expressing uncertainty or describing a state contrary to fact). |

## 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. How might I manipulate sentence structure as well as the voice and mood of verbs in order to add nuance and style to my writing?

6. Which conventions and habits define informative writing--and which habits should I avoid?

7. How and why should I make use of my skills, resources, peers, and teacher as my work takes shape?

## Application of Knowledge: Students will know that...

- A verb's voice can be either active or passive; its mood can be indicative, subjunctive, or conditional.
- 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.
- 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.
- Insert an ellipsis to indicate omitted words in a quote.
- Make oral presentations of their research, incorporating sources from various media, employing formal diction, appropriate tone, and effective body language.
- 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.
- Vary the voice and mood of verbs in order to enhance nuance in their writing.
- Write on a daily basis toward the completion of an extended research-based project.

## Teaching Points and Suggested Activities

The following teaching points 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 quotes; using the ellipsis to indicate omitted words
- Attribution, citation, and listing sources
- Priorities for peer conferences
- Verbs: tense, voice, and mood
- Digital and cloud resources for composing, revising, editing, and publishing

Typical Daily Activities

- Mini-lesson (teaching point, modeling, active engagement, sharing)
- Daily writing

- Conferences (between peers and with the teacher) and sharing

Critical Phases of Student Activity

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

Also, the following teaching points and activities are adapted from the "Investigative Journalism" 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 with students who demonstrate an aptitude and interest in journalistic writing.

Teaching Points

- Developing powers of observation
- Using moments of drama to report news cogently
- Researching and reporting
- Making short nonfiction pack a punch
- Setting ambitious goals and publishing
- Revealing underlying issues
- Developing central ideas
- Engaging readers (considering audience, getting attention and keeping it)
- Elaboration (developing ideas fully, backing them up)
- Writing partnerships
- Verb voice and verb tense
- Structuring investigative pieces

## 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.

Diagnostic Assessments

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:

- What were the implications of early numerical notation systems? (mathematics, social studies)
- How do critical engineering advances from the Roman Empire affect our lives today? (STEM, social studies)
- Why was the NASA Apollo program a significant development in the Cold War? (science, social studies)
- How did Florence, Italy in the Renaissance alter the course of European culture? (social studies, art)
- What makes mathematics and music integral to each other? (mathematics, music)
- What advances in the next century will result from 3-D printing? (STEM)
- Which lessons from history has the global economy clearly not learned? (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

**Mentor Texts:**

"Electric Circuits and Power"(in the *Prentice Hall Literature*, Grade 8 text)--text structure

"Why Leaves Turn Colors in the Fall" by Diane Ackerman (in the *Prentice Hall Literature*, Grade 8 text)--central ideas

"Brown vs. The Board of Education" by Walter Dean Myers (in the *Prentice Hall Literature*, Grade 8 text)--underlying issues, forceful effect of short nonfiction

"Paralyzed Veterans of America, "Readjustment," and "Happy Day" (in the *Prentice Hall Literature*, Grade 8 text--JOURNALISTIC PIECES)--central ideas

**Resources:**

"30 Ideas for Teaching Writing." The National Writing Project. (http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/922)

*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:*

- "Investigative Journalism." *Units of Study in Argument, Information and Narrative Writing, Grade 8.* 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 8 (Assessment-Based Instruction). Lucy Calkins, TCRWP

- *Resources for Teaching Writing* (DVD). Lucy Calkins, TCRWP

## 21st Century Skills

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| 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. |