Unit 6--Elective Projects

Content Area: **English Language Arts**
Course(s): **English Language Arts**
Time Period: **Marking Period 4**
Length: **6 to 8 weeks**
Status: **Published**

Unit Overview

During the fourth marking period, students will be given an opportunity to expand the spectrum of choices for their writing. Elective projects enable students--in consultation with their peers and their teachers--to apply their writing skills to any constructive endeavor that will yield a process or a product that is amenable to assessment. Students may choose additional essays for further academic practice, but optimally they will devise and propose projects that match the practice of writing to their interests and goals. Some examples would include constructing an informative website instructing people on the finer points of skateboarding, a script for a travelogue detailing destinations and attractions throughout the world, a cookbook, a full-length novel, fan fiction, a group effort to compile a current events magazine, an instructional manual on the construction of over-sized Lego projects, or any number of additional, similarly ambitious ideas. Students will draft both handwritten pieces as well as pieces using appropriate technology.

The true value of this phase of the school year lies in meaningful engagement in writing projects that require tremendous, intensive, sustained effort--without it feeling like traditional school work. Students ideally thrive on activities in which they direct themselves and in which they find genuine meaning.

Essential to this unit is freedom for the students. So long as they can show meaningful quality and quantity of daily work, as long as they are genuinely engaged in their own work and in the constructive assistance of other students, they should have the freedom to work on multiple projects, bounce from one to the other, or set aside projects that have lost momentum or their interest in favor of something new that captures their imagination. Students must use this time in order to generate momentum, but momentum that applies to a true enjoyment of writing, not necessarily to the completion of specific projects.

This unit requires great flexibility on the part of all involved. Students must venture outside the parameters of traditional classroom work, and teachers will understand that they may be fully unfamiliar with the topics of some students' work.

This unit makes it possible for students to end the school year and move on to the high school with a highly positive feeling about writing and an understanding of its practical applications. It is intended to enable students to take true ownership of a capacity that will enhance their success in the future.

Standards

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.
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.8.10	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.L.8.1	Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
LA.L.8.2	Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.
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.

Essential Questions

1. How can I best match my interests with a goal for my writing?

2. Who is my intended audience as I write, and how must I suit my work to that audience?

3. To which of this year's units of study will my work apply, and how will I use the skills I learned?

4. What should inspire me and influence me as I write?

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

6. Which subjects outside of ELA pertain to this work?

7. How will I make it clear that I have used my time wisely and constructively--even if I am unable to bring my project to completion or if I cannot continue on project and must move on to another.

Application of Knowledge: Students will know that…

- 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.
- Effective writing results from a synthesis of inspiring and effective examples of writing.
- 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.
- Writing outside of a particular genre requires planning and judgment regarding approach, technique, and conventions.

Application of Skills: Students will be able to…

- Apply constructive criticism received from their peers and from the teacher with regard to basic skills, pacing, dialogue, sequencing, character development, theme, and literary devices.
- Apply pertinent skills from previous units of study to their projects.
- Apply the basic skills of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation properly to their writing.
- Apply vocabulary that is suited to the topics and audiences of their projects.
- Assist and receive assistance from peers in developing ideas, writing, revising, and editing.
- Complete at least the final phase of their work using digital and cloud capabilities and produce final products in digital form.
- Draw elements and techniques from exemplars that they have found, and experiment with those features in their work.
- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Teaching Points and Suggested Activities

Teachers may wish to recapitulate various topics and teaching points from *Units of Study in Argument, Information and Narrative Writing, Grades 6-8* (Calkins et al., 2014) in anticipation of priorities that students will have for their elective topics.

The following teaching points specifically address the objectives, standards, and essential questions of this unit:

- Generating topics and projects based on your interests
- Determining your target audience and how to reach them
- Skills review: spelling, capitalization, punctuation
- Suiting vocabulary to your medium
- Priorities for peer and teacher conferences
- Finding exemplars and drawing inspirations
- 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

Assessments

Assessment in this unit is essentially formative, as the emphasis is not on product but on process. Teachers will meet with students early in the term of the unit in order to discuss goals and activities. From there, periodic teacher conferences will serve as formative assessment.

Additionally, student self-assessment and peer assessment should take place whenever possible. 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

The nature of these projects is incompatible with either diagnostic or summative assessment. This unit emphasizes exploration and process, which are assessed formatively. Teachers and students should have a project-proposal conference early, however, in order to establish a framework for the students' work.

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 based on objectives worked out early in the unit between the teacher and individual students

Summative Assessment

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

Again, the activities of this unit do not necessarily permit for summative assessment, nor do they require a finished product. A final conference, however, should assess process and progress based on the project-proposal conference early in the unit, resulting in a unit score.

Activities to Differentiate Instruction

This unit requires intensive differentiation, as all students will work on unique, individualized projects--sometimes multiple projects.

Once again, this unit focuses primarily on process, not product. Students will learn to apply the skills they have learned all year to endeavors that integrate their own individual tastes, talents, skills, and degrees of aptitude. Students are held accountable for demonstrating growth along the goal of merging their skill with a topic they enjoy. It is specifically during the project proposal conference that the teacher will work with each student to clarify the indicators of this kind of growth and the outcomes that will make that growth clear.

Some students may lack the motivation, confidence, or skills necessary for a highly aggressive and experimental project. For such students, teachers may suggest--or in the absence of meaningful project ideas from the student, prescribe--a series of remedial projects based on past units of study that require additional practice. Most students, however, will--based on the mini-lesson for generating project ideas--have a set of three or more feasible projects. The teacher may understand that some students will need the flexibility to work on different projects on different days in order to overcome writer's block, frustration, or disappointment at having chosen one project that was not right for them. More advanced students, however, will often have specific ideas about which they are highly enthusiastic. Such projects will sometimes involved complications

(such as the need for intensive research, outside resources, or extended periods of time) that will make completion--or even significant progress--entirely infeasible. The most important priority is that students focus on the process of associating writing with topics and pastimes of great joy to them.

GATE students will often fall into that latter scenario, and yet some of them will prove themselves to be remarkably resourceful. They must be encouraged to seek out as many resources, personnel, and experiences as they can muster. The editorial and publication model suggested for other units may not be compatible for GATE students as they complete this unit--unless, of course, some of them choose to undertake a publication of some sort as their project. Students performing at a high level and who have a chance of completing their projects should consider a new level of achievement: mass publication. This would mean that they submit some form of their work from this unit to a local, regional or national periodical or publisher--in accordance with applicable district policy and with their parents' permission--so that their work can reach a mass audience. The *Resources* section of this unit contains suggestions as to where students may wish to consider submitting their work.

Concerning ongoing, day-to-day opportunities for differentiation, 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.

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.

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.

Integrated/Cross-Disciplinary Instruction

Projects undertaken in this unit have the potential to involve heavy integration of concepts and resources not only from other content areas, but from diverse vocational and avocational fields of endeavor. Anything from web publishing to video editing, to on-stage performance could conceivably be involved.

While it helps for a teacher to be prepared to instruct students on applicable concepts from other content areas, a critical objective for this unit involves fostering an intrinsic motivation on the part of the student to investigate other subjects and vocational possibilities in an aggressive and enthusiastic fashion. Teachers, therefore, should become facilitators who suggests paths and resources rather than prescribe them.

The following are conceivable elective projects and pertinent external fields of investigation:

- a full-length novel: seeking a professional mentor, a literary agent, and a deal with a major publisher
- an on-line guide to stock and bond investment: interviews with local financial professionals; use of stock indexes (Dow Jones, NASDAQ, FTSE, CAC40), bond indexes, continually updated on-line sources of currency values and interest rates
- literature adapted for performance: conventions of stage production, GBMS auditorium use, theatrical equipment
- op/ed publishing: local and national publications, submission guidelines
- exhibition, commentary, and review of GBMS student art: art history, contemporary criticism, display and exhibition materials
- investigative report on crime in Green Brook: partnership/cooperation with local law enforcement, statistical databases

Suggested Mentor Texts and Other Resources

Mentor Texts:

In this units, students will choose their own mentor texts consistent with the types of writing that they undertake. They will justify their selections when they meet with teachers to discuss their projects.

In the case of students who require intensive intervention, teachers may prescribe remedial projects, referring back to mentor texts in previous units, some of which are listed in the Calkins resource below.

Resources:

Units of Study in Argument, Information and Narrative Writing, Grade 8. Calkins et al., 2014

Publications to which learners may wish to submit their work:

Local

The Courier News (http://archive.mycentraljersey.com/section/GETPUBLISHED01)

The Green Brook Gazette (http://rennamedia.com/submit-news/)

Regional

The Star Ledger (oped@starledger.com)

New Jersey Magazine (http://njmonthly.com/writers-guidelines/)

National

Poetry Magazine (http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/submissions)

Teen Ink (http://www.teenink.com/submit)

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.