Bringing History to Life

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Most units begin with you providing lots of scaffolding and in the end have you remove the scaffolds and say to kids, “Go to it! Proceed with more independence.” This unit, instead, keeps the scaffolds in place and brings students to more and more challenging work. It will be your job, after the unit is over, to teach a second cycle of this work, bringing all that students did to write these research reports to a new topic, this time saying to youngsters, “Go to it! You know how to organize a research report. You know how to incorporate citations, to build a logical structure, to use text features to highlight your central idea, to . . . go to it!”

**Welcome to the Unit**

Jerome Bruner once said, “Experience over the past decade points to the fact that our schools may be wasting precious years by postponing the teaching of many important subjects on the grounds that they are too difficult. . . . The foundations of any subject may be taught to anybody at any age in some form.” ([The Process of Education](#), 1976, 76.)

In this unit, you bring your fourth-graders squarely into the rigors of academic life. You help them dive deep into the project of writing research reports, writing not one but two reports during the unit. The students write about the American Revolution in the unit, but the curriculum is designed so that it can be adapted to apply to other history-based units as well. As part of their research, they wrestle with citations, primary documents, conflicting views on a subject, and with the challenge of incorporating and synthesizing information of all sorts into logically structured chapters. That is, you teach the foundations of research report writing to your students.

You could decide to fend off academic pressures for as long as possible, showing your fourth-graders small ways to ramp up their third-grade work, but in this unit, you do the opposite. You bring students headlong into this invigorating work. And, most importantly, you explicitly teach students, step by step, what they need to know to rise to this challenge. Before long, students will be assigned to write research reports and sent off to the library and to their homes. Their teachers will signal, “It’s up to you. Sink or swim.” You instead get into the deep water with your kids and give them a hand. You stay involved at every step along the way, demonstrating, scaffolding, and guiding. You help students succeed first with text-based information writing that is fairly accessible, and then you ratchet things up a notch. This time you remind them to draw on what they already know, and you help with the especially new and demanding aspects of the work. In that way, you move students along, step by step, toward proficiency.

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**Overview of the Unit**

At the start of the unit, you’ll remind students of what they know about writing a basic, boxes-and-bullets information text, and then they’ll draw on this to write two information chapters, starting with one on the more accessible and general topic, “all about the American Revolution,” and then progressing to one on a more focused topic. The expectation is that students will be bringing with them all they know about information writing from previous years and that their work in this portion of the unit will meet the big requirements of the third-grade Common Core State Standards (CCSS). For example, they should be able to introduce a topic and group related information (W.3.2a) and then develop the topic, elaborating with some facts, definitions, and details (W.3.2b).

Students will select those more focused topics, but one of the ways that you scaffold them in this work is to strongly encourage them to select topics the class has studied together. This is a writing unit, and most of the class time is spent writing, rather than researching, so this makes it especially important for students to rely on research they have already done, when possible.
Students tend to select topics such as the Boston Tea Party and the Boston Massacre. As students write all about these topics, you'll help them to transfer and apply all they learned in third grade. You'll also help by providing them with a mentor text that is not one written by an adult author but, instead, is one written by a student from a previous year.

All in all, this means that just as earlier in the year, fourth-graders began their essay work with a spirited boot camp in which the whole class worked together to compose an essay in defense of ice cream, your students will now be given lots of help writing first an overview about the American Revolution. As they write these overviews, you will immediately begin to steer them toward some of the new work they are expected to do as fourth-grade information writers according to the CCSS. You will teach them more sophisticated ways to organize their writing, such as including formatting such as headings and subheadings (W.4.2a), and to include information that is rich, detailed, and concrete (W.4.2b).

You'll also help them learn that information texts are often conglomerates, containing a lot of other kinds of texts. This means that a research report on the American Revolution might contain a few all-about chapters, a how-to chapter (maybe "How to Protect Your Home from the British"), and an essay (perhaps "The American Revolution Has Shaped American History"). Such a nonfiction book could contain stories as well (maybe "The Day of the First Shot Fired"). The first bend in the road of the unit ends with students completing a small book in which each chapter is written as a different genre.

In the second bend of the unit, students will narrow in on a subtopic of their choice—with some students continuing to research their original topic. Fourth grade is the first level in the Common Core in which students are expected to draw evidence from texts to support analysis, reflection, and research (W.4.9). This bend in the unit provides an opportunity for students to do just that, in a way that is carefully scaffolded and guided. Again, students will learn to choose a logical structure for their books. In this portion of the unit, because students are working on subtopics of their own choosing, they'll rely on their knowledge and their research. They'll continue to be explicitly taught the skills of effective research writing. They'll learn to use increasingly sophisticated transition words and phrases in a purposeful way (W.4.2c) and to clarify and bring out the structure in their writing (W.4.2a). They'll move toward the challenging expectations of the Common Core regarding elaboration in fourth grade as they learn how to present important information through the use of historical details, text features, and quotations. A main thread that weaves throughout this bend is highlighting importance. Students will learn to make logical choices about structure to help readers to understand the most important information in their pieces. In doing so, they'll begin to move toward the fifth-grade expectations of the Common Core regarding structure (W.5.2a). They'll also learn that text features, when created thoughtfully, can help to underscore the main message of a piece of writing, as can a writer's thoughtful decisions about the kinds of vocabulary words to include (W.4.2d and W.5.2d).

Bend III takes this work to an entirely new level as students move from organizing information to developing their own ideas about the information. This bend is all about historical interpretation, very heady work for fourth-graders, but work for which they have been aptly prepared throughout not only this unit of study but the entire school year. Their research will take on a new bent as they generate life lessons from their topics, generate questions, and then hypothesize and research answers to those questions. This work is directly in line with the Common Core's expectation that fourth- and fifth-grade writers embark on investigations of a topic (W.4.7 and W.5.7) and is carefully scaffolded in such a way that it feels approachable for students trying it for perhaps the first time. Of course, as students take on this work, they are reaching not only for the Common Core State Standards in writing, but in reading as well. They are considering themes and lessons, (R.L4.2), considering different points of view (R.I4.6), and integrating information from texts in a way that feels purposeful and organic (R.I4.9). As always, students will spend time editing their writing before publication, this time with a focus on the unique way that historical writers use punctuation. The unit will culminate with an expert fair, at which students will be given the opportunity to teach others all they have learned about their topic.

**ASSESSMENT**

Our expectation is that at the start of the year, you will have assessed your students as information writers, and we assume their information writing has grown stronger since then, because work in one type of writing enriches what students can do in other types of writing. Also, presumably your students will have done some writing and a lot of reading of information texts outside of writing workshop in the content areas. If you did conduct an assessment at the start of the year, you’ll be able to track the progress students have made from then until now in information writing.
In any case, we recommend that just before launching this unit, you spend one class period conducting another on-demand information writing assessment. Ideally, you will use the same prompt and same conditions as before, and the same as other teachers, so that the products your writers produce will be comparable. On the day before the assessment, you can let your students know that you will be conducting the assessment so that they can be prepared. Say to them:

“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 informational (or all-about) text that teaches 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. You will have only this one period, 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.”

Of course, you’ll say this again, right before the assessment, and then you’ll provide forty-five minutes for writing. Don’t worry if your students do not bring source information. They do not need to do so to be at standard for fourth grade. This clause (and some others like it) is part of the prompt simply because the prompt needs to be consistent for K-8 students, and some portions of the prompt become important for middle school students. When students actually do the on-demand writing, you will want to add:

“In your writing, make sure you:

• Write an introduction
• Elaborate with a variety of information
• Organize your writing
• Use transition words
• Write a conclusion”

Once your students have completed this task, you’ll want to use the information writing checklists to study their work. By this point in the year, you will expect to see that most of your students demonstrate that they have mastered most of the big work of the third-grade expectations outlined by the checklists and the third-grade Common Core State Standards and some of the fourth-grade standards as well. That is, you may find that many of your students already introduce their topic, group related information together, and provide some elaboration, which means some will already be doing much of the work of the fourth-grade standards. This assessment, however, comes at the start of this unit, so if your students are performing solidly at the third-grade level, that should not be a cause for concern.

If your students are, for the most part, doing work that is more closely aligned to the second-grade standards, level 2 of the Information Writing Learning Progression, you may want to teach another information writing unit prior to embarking on this one. If one of your colleagues in the school has The Art of Information Writing, the third-grade book from this series, and is not using it at this point, you could borrow that book and teach a variation of that unit. The If . . . Then . . . Curriculum book provides other options.

Most teachers who have done the on-demand assessment have been pleasantly surprised by how much students bring into this unit of study and by the volume of writing students are able to produce in just one day’s writing workshop. The work that students produce in the on-demand situation becomes the baseline, and you can increase expectations as the unit progresses.

Early on, we recommend that you introduce your class to the checklists that they will use to study their work throughout the unit. From the other units of study, your fourth-graders will already be familiar with how to use these checklists. By providing this opportunity to preview what will be expected of them, you allow your students to begin to visualize final products and to reach for lofty goals right from the start. You may even take some class time for your students to study their on-demand writing with the checklist in hand and to set a few preliminary goals for their work. Throughout the unit, you will channel students to study their work, thus providing them the opportunity to celebrate their progress and set new goals to ensure they are continually outgrowing themselves as writers.

GETTING READY

Because this unit has a research component, you will need to spend some time beforehand collecting engaging, appropriately leveled materials on the topic you are studying. On the CD-ROM, you will find a bibliography of online and print sources at various reading levels that you can use to support the work of this unit if you go along with our choice of topic, the American Revolution.

This unit has been designed so that it follows a social studies unit. That is, if your students are going to use the writing workshop to write about the
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Revolutionary War, they need to have already studied that topic during social studies time. If you want to teach this unit, and your students do not have that prior knowledge base, one of your options is to take a different social studies unit and to infuse it into this unit. That is, the students could be writing about Ancient Egypt instead of the American Revolution. A switch like that will increase the amount of work you need to do because you’ll need to find your own articles, write your own examples, and so forth, but this is all entirely possible. The other option is to teach this social studies unit, at least for a week, prior to embarking on this unit, and then during the unit to allow there to be double periods for English and social studies.

The unit is designed so that you need not have taught a stellar unit on the American Revolution prior to this work. However, there is no question but that the more your students know about the topic, the richer their learning and their writing will be. So yes, ideally, leading up to the launch of the unit, you will teach your children a lot about the topic of study so they’ll begin on Day One with lots and lots to say. If you can flood your children with images and stories about the time period, their writing will be much richer. You might want to set up each child with a social studies folder and have them decorate the covers with a picture of themselves as a historian or person of the time period. Alternatively, perhaps kids will collect their learning in a tabbed section in their already-established social studies notebook or writer’s notebook. In any case, the more information your students are able to collect beforehand, the better equipped they’ll be to stock their reports with rich elaboration without having to constantly interrupt writing to seek out information. As they become experts, they’ll be eager to share what they’ve learned and the ideas they have about all the new information.

Most teachers find that mentor texts can be powerful coteachers in any writing unit. This is especially true in information writing, when clear examples of structure, elaboration, and other hallmarks of the genre will be key. For this unit, we recommend *The Revolutionary War* by Josh Gregory, the book that comes in the trade book pack that is sold alongside this series, and we provide tips for how best to use this text throughout the unit.

Examples of particularly helpful kinds of sources you’ll find on the CD-ROM are:

- A list of trade books on the American Revolution—especially *Liberty! How the Revolutionary War Began* by Lucille Recht Penner, *The Eve of the Revolution* by Barbara Burt, and books by Jean Fritz, such as *What’s the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?* and *Can’t You Make Them Behave, King George?*
- Internet sites for video resources related to the American Revolution
- Primary sources related to the American Revolution
- Bookmarked kid-friendly Internet search engines

Meanwhile, we hope you have colleagues who will be teaching this unit alongside you and that you set up a schedule of times to share. There will be lots to talk about!
IN THIS SESSION, you’ll teach students that writers improve their writing by adding details. History writers often try to include details that help readers picture what happened long ago.

GETTING READY

✔ Some of Jean Fritz’s books to refer to when sharing information about the author (see Teaching) (This is optional.)
✔ Excerpts from Milton Meltzer’s *The American Revolutionaries* (1993, 50, 51), or other nonfiction text related to the overarching historical topic your class is writing about (see Active Engagement)
✔ A variety of sources for students to use when researching, including informational books, articles, and primary sources
✔ A book related to the topic you are writing about (see Mid-Workshop Teaching)
✔ “Ways to Push Our Thinking” anchor chart, from The Boxes and Bullets unit (see Mid-Workshop Teaching)
✔ “Daily Life during the Revolutionary War” chart (see Share)
✔ Pictures related to students’ topics (see Share)
✔ Chart paper and markers (see Share)

Session 5

**Elaboration**

*The Details that Let People Picture What Happened Long Ago and Far Away*

Several years ago, at one of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project’s summer institute on the teaching of writing, a teacher wrote a memoir about her divorce. I still remember one section of her writing. She described opening the door to her husband’s closet, seeing it empty. Her toddler came and stood beside her, looking into the closet. “Who took Daddy’s shoes?” he asked.

To me, that detail captures so much. The way that every bit of her home echoed with emptiness. The young child’s perspective: “Who took Daddy’s shoes?”

Memorable details bring writing to life. One of my all-time favorite lines is from Cynthia Rylant’s *The Relatives Came* (1993): “It was hard getting used to all that new breathing in the house.” I read that and felt the shock of seeing my exact experience there on the page.

Details like those bring to life the experience of divorce, of the relatives coming. As Richard Price has said, “The bigger the issue, the smaller you write.” Ralph Fletcher tells about the day he noted that his fastidious father had threaded his belt so that it was outside one of the belt loops—that belt loop shocked Ralph into realizing something was amiss.

How crucial it is, then, for children to understand that if their goal is to bring to life a time and place that is utterly unlike our own, details become all the more important.
Elaboration
The Details that Let People Picture What Happened Long Ago and Far Away

CONNECTION

Celebrate the volume of writing that children have done, and meanwhile also acknowledge that just as writing fast and furious is helpful, so, too, it is helpful to pause in the midst of writing.

“Writers, yesterday we talked about the fact that teaching can be a way to prime the pump for writing, and my goodness, that is what happened for many of you! Thumbs up if you found that after you taught about your topic, it wasn’t hard to do a lot of writing?” Many children signaled that. “How many of you wrote more than a page last night at home? More than two pages? More than three? Wow! Give yourselves a pat on the back.” The children got their due recognition.

“Just as it is great to write fast and furious, it is also important to pause, to reread, and to even rethink what you have written. I know that first you are told to write quickly; now you are being told to pause and to reread—but actually those two bits of advice go together. An artist might sketch a portrait quickly in charcoal, and then, having sketched quickly, the artist pauses to say, ‘How do I like it?’ Sometimes the artist keeps going; sometimes the artist changes things.”

“Shifting between writing and rereading is important no matter what kind of text you are writing. You’ll always want to pause, to reread your writing, and to think, ‘What’s not so good that I can fix up?’ Most of you have a goal from yesterday, and that is one thing you can fix up in your writing.”

Name the teaching point.

“Today, I want to teach you that often when you reread a draft of your writing, you will find that you’ve written in stick figures, without a lot of detail. One of the best ways to improve any piece of writing is to add details. Historians often try to give the details that help readers picture what happened in a long-ago and faraway time.”

MINILESSON

We’ve actually come to believe that one of the best ways to support revision is to encourage kids to draft more quickly. When a child invests a week in slowly writing what he or she hopes will be a perfect piece, that child is reluctant to revise. But if the piece was written in a day, the writer is often more game for revision.

Children did this same work when writing fiction. They learned to stop writing, to draw a line, and to think, “How else could this go?”

In the Common Core State Standards, elaboration is one of the key descriptors for each of the three kinds of writing that are valued—information, argument, and opinion. Of course, the ways that writers elaborate are not the same when a writer is writing a narrative or an information text, but in both instances, this is important.
TEACHING

Explain the importance of detail in history writing by telling about a well-known history writer who values details and by citing a few of the ones she’s used in her writing.

“Jean Fritz, a famous writer of history books, once said, ‘I dote on small details. In researching Ben Franklin, I read in one book after another that Franklin learned ten swimming tricks. What were they?’ Fritz couldn’t rest until she knew what those ten tricks were. She just had to know. After a long search, she uncovered all of the tricks—including one trick that involved Ben Franklin cutting his toenails underwater! Another of Ben Franklin’s tricks was swimming with his legs tied together.

“Jean Fritz’s obsession with details was not just her way. If you look at the most famous writers of history, many of them, like Jean Fritz, use details to make history come alive.

“When a writer of informational books wants to elaborate in this way, it helps to pause, and to say, ‘What do I need to learn about?’ like Jean Fritz did. Then the writer shifts from being a writer to being a researcher, looking for the details that bring people, places, and events to life.”

Tell students to read, noting not just the main facts but also the intriguing details and particular stories that will enliven their writing.

“One way to get details is just to read like a magnet, letting intriguing details stick to you. Often the details don’t seem like they are the important facts such as those that you’d be expected to produce on a test about this topic. They may seem quirky, even trivial. If you were reading to prepare for a test on the topic, you might not notice the details. But when you are a writer, you read as a writer, and that means you are a magnet for intriguing, quirky, odd details. A bricklayer builds with bricks. A writer builds with detail. Details are one of the most important materials you will use in any writing that you do—so make note of detail as you read.”

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Instruct the students to listen for details as you read an excerpt from an informational text and then discuss the ideas those details sparked.

“Let’s practice reading for details, as a writer does. Let’s read snippets of Robert Sessions’s eyewitness account of the Boston Tea Party, recounted in Meltzer’s The American Revolutionaries. As you listen to this, think about what you might want to record in your notes, to remember in your mind, to use later in your writing. Instead of focusing on the broad who, where, when, and what questions, pay attention to details that somehow seem to you to matter, to add up. Sessions describes the scene when he got to the Boston Tea Party this way”:
Everything was as light as day, by the means of lamps and torches—a pin might be seen lying on the wharf. I went on board where they were at work, and took hold with my own hands. I was not one of those... who disguised themselves as Indians, but was a volunteer, the disguised men being largely men of family and position in Boston... Although there were many people on the wharf, entire silence prevailed—no clamor, no talking. Nothing was meddled with but the teas on board... After having emptied the hold, the deck was swept clean, and everything put in its proper place. (1993, 50, 51)

"Will you tell each other some of the details you noticed, and what those details made you think? Turn and talk."

After children talked a bit, I reconvened the group. "I heard many of you talk about the way the ship was lit up with torches so that it was as light as day. A pin might be seen lying on the wharf. The powerful thing is that those details connect, don’t they, to the next thing Sessions wrote about, which was the fact that the prosperous and well-connected rebels were disguised as Indians, but Sessions and others from less fancy positions weren’t disguised."

Kids’ eyes lit up, as if they were just now taking in the significance of that. "You see how the details—not just one detail, but several details—can click together like pieces of a puzzle to create the bigger picture. I’m getting a picture of how at the Boston Tea Party, the little guys took big risks. But then, the entire story of the American Revolution is about ‘little guys’ taking risks. That big idea is carried in the small details."

Channel writers to study their own writing with a critical eye, looking for parts that would benefit from more detail.

"Writers, right now will you take a second to reread the last bit of writing you did yesterday and notice how many details you have included? Notice, too, places where your writing seems a bit bare-bones. When you find a place that needs more details, star it so you know to go back and flesh it out later."

While partners talked, I crouched beside Natasha whose partner was absent. "Natasha, I noticed you made a star on this part. What are you thinking?"

"Well, it is about the patriots planning the Boston Tea Party, and I realized I didn’t have a lot of details about it. I want to find out why the colonists were so mad about the tax on tea, and maybe how they planned the whole thing without people catching on to it. They must have had to be sneaky so the British wouldn’t find out. I think that would be really cool to find out."

Debrief in a way that emphasizes the importance of detail.

After a minute, I voiced over to the class, saying, "I’m glad that you are being hard on yourself, writers. Jean Fritz didn’t settle for just the general facts about Ben Franklin—she didn’t just settle on knowing that he learned ten tricks. She wanted to know the specific tricks. Just like Fritz, you can try to find the details that will make your writing come to life."
Send writers off to work by reminding them that details matter, while cautioning them that searching for details can consume a lot of time, and they also need to keep deadlines in mind.

“I hope that from this day forward, you always remember that details matter as much in informational writing as in personal narrative writing. But I also need to say that it is easy to get lost in the process of looking for one detail and before you know it, writing time has slid by. So balance looking for the details that will bring your writing to life, and pushing yourself to write, using all you know about informational writing.”
As you confer on this day, you may decide to spend some of your time channeling kids toward rich sources that will yield the kinds of details you taught them to value. If you are fortunate enough to have Internet-enabled computers in your classroom or access to a computer lab, you can concentrate some of your conferring time on helping students who are less Internet savvy to learn to conduct searches and home in on useful information quickly. The Internet is a resource like any other that takes some know-how to use properly. Even though many students are digital natives, more at home in the digital world than we are, they aren’t always adept at using search engines effectively to find information on a specific topic.

You may want to prepare for this session by bookmarking search engines that will be helpful to them, such as kidrex.org, askkids.com, yahooligans.com, awesomelibrary.org, and onekey.com; as well as kid-friendly websites that provide historical content, such as kids.gov and americaslibrary.gov.

In conferences, small groups, or special "courses" you offer on using search engines to locate information, you may want to teach some of these tips to your students:

◆ If a web search doesn’t yield fruitful results, an image search just might. For example, an image search of “George Washington and Valley Forge” yields images of the Continental troops trudging through snowy misery, Washington kneeling to pray for his men, and Washington walking through the makeshift camp, offering hope to the freezing, battle-weary soldiers. These powerful images have much to offer to students searching for the details of specific events. Additionally, these searches may yield other kinds of visual information, such as maps, that can help kids to add different kinds of detail to their writing.

◆ When conducting Internet searches, young people are apt to enter too many words (or words that are too tangential). Often, kids enter an entire question into the search box, such as: “What did Paul Revere’s clothes look like when he

Conferring and Small-Group Work

Conducting Research on the Internet

Mid-Workshop Teaching

Coaching Writers to Grow Ideas about Their Notes

“Writers, I have a very important tip about note-taking. It is a tip I didn’t learn until I was in college, but I wish I had learned earlier. Good note-takers don’t just write fact after fact. Instead they pause, giving themselves space to grow ideas about those facts. Let me show you what I mean. I’m going to read you a little section from a book that tells about what happened after the Boston Massacre, and I want you to think about what you could write if you were recording not just the facts, but your thoughts. Get yourself ready to write ‘This is important because . . . ’ or ‘The surprising/interesting thing about this is that . . . ’.” I opened the book and read:

John Adams, a well-known patriot, was one of the lawyers who defended the (British) soldiers. He worked hard to convince the jury that the British soldiers were just defending themselves. In the end, the judge decided there wasn’t enough evidence to find the soldiers guilty, so they were released.

“Start by writing, ‘This is surprising because . . . ’ and then keep going, fast and furious." After another pause, I continued, "Now try, ‘To add on . . . ’ and keep going, fast and furious."

I gave the class another moment, and then continued to call out prompts intermittently, such as “As I write this, I'm realizing . . . ” I ended by calling out, “All in all, what I want to say is that . . . ”

Then I asked children to talk as a class about what they thought after hearing the passage. Edward blurted out, “Why was Sam Adams defending the British soldiers? He was against the British. He’s a Son of Liberty.”

(continues)
Remind kids to keep track of the websites they use so they can credit these sources in their writing. It’s important to clarify the difference between a search engine and an actual source. Many children list “Google” on their bibliography page. Google is a tool one uses to find information, but it is not a source itself. The websites one clicks on that give actual information are considered sources.

Teaching a few keyword strategies can be helpful. For example, if a researcher types a phrase into a search engine, typically the results will contain any of those words, in any order. Typing the phrase Most Famous Battle in the Revolutionary War may return sites that are not about the Revolutionary War, but are about revolutionary tactics used in World War II. Putting quotes around the whole phrase tells the search engine to only return pages that have those words in the exact order. Additionally, using keywords such as “and” and “or” to search can be helpful. Searching for Washington and Jefferson will return sites with both of those terms. Searching for Washington or Jefferson will return sites with one or the other.

As many of us who have found ourselves in the rabbit-hole of online searching can attest, the Internet can be a time-waster. Be on the lookout for writers who are spending more than ten minutes or so online, getting mired in the endless lists of results a search yields. At this point, kids should be collecting very specific details quickly, and then getting on with their writing. Periodically check the computer screens to make sure kids aren’t returning to the search engine screen again and again, but are homing in quickly on a fruitful site.

Of course, not all of your conferring on this day will be spent teaching your fourth-graders to conduct research online. As in previous sessions where kids were gathering information from sources, you’ll want to keep a watchful eye out for those who are simply copying right from a text. Many times this copying occurs because the text is too difficult for the particular writer. It may help to remind students who are copying directly from their texts that it is helpful to pause before jotting down notes, even going so far as to close the book or the website, and then take a moment or two to formulate what they might jot in their notes before putting pen to paper. If they have no idea what to write after closing the book or website, it could be a good indication that they need to track down a source that they can digest more easily.
Channel students to study pictures related to their topics, noticing details about the time period.

“Writers, will you come to the meeting area so we can talk, and before you come, will you locate a picture you have, one that you can grab easily, related to your topic?” Once children had convened, I began. “We’ve thought a lot about the importance of details to your research. Details will become important in a new way starting tomorrow, because you’ll be writing stories that teach readers about your topic, and you’ll want to situate your stories in the world of those times. So you’ll need to know details about the people’s daily lives.

“I want to remind you that you can collect details not only from reading texts but also by observing. Remember that in order to write Charlotte’s Web (1952), E. B. White spent days observing a spider in his barn? History writers can’t observe the past, but you can study documents—paintings, photographs, letters, and the like.

“Writers, those of you who have a picture related to your topic, will you put it where a lot of kids can see it?” Soon the meeting area divided itself into clusters of kids, looking at one picture or another.

“Will your group study that picture closely now? Think of it as a secret map of the times, one that tells clues to those times, clues that have miraculously survived the generations and ended up in your hands. Tell each other the details about the time period that you can detect from the clues.”

After some time, I said, “Daniel has noticed that men and women appear to be separate in his picture. Look at the objects in your pictures. Are they holding quill pens? A bayonet? Look again, and talk about what you see in the photograph that you could add to what you are learning.”

After a bit, I said, “Let’s collect some observations. You are all looking at glimpses of the same time period, so what can we as a class say about, say, the clothes worn by men and boys?”

“Wool stockings, up to their knees.” “Leather shoes.” “Hats with three corners.”

“Girls and women?”

“Mop caps, aprons, gowns, tuckers.”
This continued, until the class had collected details such as these, which I listed on chart paper.

**Instruct students to envision the time period, thinking about how the details they collected can help shape the stories they will write in the next session.**

“Writers, all of these details about daily life in this era bring to mind the stories of people who lived through the events we’re learning about. These people had decisions to make, choices to wrestle with. One way information writers make history come alive is by telling the stories of people who lived in a particular era. Right now, think about one possible Small Moment story you might tell related to your topic. What might have been the decisions, the choices, that a person who lived through your event wrestled with? Could one of those become a story?” I left a bit of silence. “Thumbs up if you have one possible idea,” I said. Then I continued. “Picture the story like it is a movie. Who is doing what at the start?” I gave the children a moment to think. “Now bring into your mental image as many details from the times as you can.” Again I gave children a moment to envision. “Tell each other what is happening and how your knowledge of the times is shaping your story. Turn and talk.”

### SESSION 5 HOMEWORK

**BRAINSTORMING NARRATIVE STORIES FOR YOUR INFORMATIONAL BOOK**

Tomorrow you’ll have a chance to move into another chapter of your informational book, this time writing a narrative about your topic. You just took some time in your small group to come up with one possible Small Moment story to tell. Tonight, I’d like you to take a look at your timeline, your notes, the writing you have done so far, and come up with at least three possible stories that you could include in your informational book. You don’t have to write any of the stories yet, just come up with a list. Tomorrow you’ll have a chance to write the actual narrative. But if you do some planning tonight, it will be easier for you to get right to work.

**Daily Life during the Revolutionary War**

- **Clothing**
  - men and boys: breeches, woolen stockings, leather shoes, and tricorn hats
  - women and girls: mop caps, aprons, gowns, and tuckers
  - Colonial soldiers: plain uniform of brown, red, or blue
  - British soldiers: fancy red uniform (called lobsterbacks)

- **Food**
  - Soldiers had a ration of salted meat, dry beans, and hard bread.
  - Most people ate simple foods, like corn, bread, salted meat, and few fruits.

- **Money**
  - Shillings
  - Pounds
  - Continentals—paper money worth about the same as a pound, released in 1775

- **Kinds of shops**
  - Silversmith
  - Gunsmith
  - Tailor
  - Apothecary
  - Blacksmith

- **Language**
  - ‘tis—it is
  - ‘twill—it will
  - ye—the
  - Sir—A way to address a man
  - Madame—A way to address a woman