Unit Four - The Literary Essay: *Equipping Ourselves with the Tools to Write Expository Texts that Advance an Idea about Literature*
January/February

Welcome to the Unit

This unit builds the groundwork for the fourth-grade unit *The Literary Essay: Writing about Fiction*, as well as the work third graders will be asked to do on the state tests. That fourth-grade book teaches students to write literary essays that develop strong interpretive theses about literature, support those theses in organized ways, use textual evidence to efficiently support their claim, and transition seamlessly between reasons, evidence, and the like. In that fourth-grade unit, students read and reread a familiar short story, then a familiar novel, and eventually they work across two texts. In this way, they progress from simpler, more straightforward literary essays to those built around more complex theses to compare-and-contrast essays. Writing to defend claims about literature requires close reading, attention to literary craft, and the ability to cite and defend relevant textual evidence. For this reason, many of you may decide to expose children to literary essay writing in third grade. This unit stands on the shoulders of the work children did in second grade--writing to defend claims about literature. The unit aims to make reading a more intense, thoughtful experience for children by equipping them with tools they need to write simple essays that advance an idea about a piece of literature. This unit relies on children’s prior experience with opinion writing, suggesting that instead of writing about opinions such as “It is important to recycle,” they can now write about claims such as “Winn Dixie teaches people to care for each other.”

Assessments, Tests, Standards

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) emphasize the importance of teaching children to read closely to determine what a text says not only explicitly but also implicitly. That is, in third grade, students are expected to refer explicitly to the text, demonstrating an understanding of the text (RL.3.1), and by fourth grade students are expected to draw inferences, citing details and examples to support the claim (RL.4.1). Similarly, the standards ask that children learn to analyze and interpret texts, analyzing “how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text” (Anchor Standard R.3).
The CCSS is also clear that students must have the ability to write arguments about topics and texts (the expectation of the first Anchor Standard for College and Career Readiness). This unit offers students the chance to begin developing their skills at essay writing; in particular, it will support them in transferring and applying all they have learned in Writing About Reading and Changing the World: Persuasive Speeches, Petitions, and Editorials to now write simple essays about texts. The unit also gives you a chance to shore up the elements of argument writing about which your students are unsure. You will want to have all of your data from across the year at hand to ensure that you are helping students move along a trajectory of work and make progress in large, visible ways.

**Overview**

**Essential Question:** How can I write an essay that states a strong opinion about a piece of literature and supports it clearly with reasons and evidence from the text?

- **Bend I: (Generate Ideas about Literature),** you'll teach children that just as essayists pay close attention to their lives, literary essayists pay close attention to texts. Children will select a text from several they are familiar with and generate lots of entries about it. You will teach them to mine the text for ideas, pulling out a favorite passage or line and explaining why that passage stayed with them after they were finished reading or why it is so powerful or how it relates to the rest of the text as a whole. They will then elaborate on these ideas, expanding their thinking so that you can then channel them to choose one seed idea and write a thesis statement that they can grow into an essay. You will probably want to spend only several days in this bend.

  *How can I explore ideas about literature that help me develop a thesis statement to grow into an essay?*

- **Bend II: (Support and Craft the Arguments),** children will gather evidence to support their claims, elaborating on and crafting their arguments. You will scaffold children’s work as they draft, revise, and edit their essays, working hard at retelling important moments from the text, angling their essays to support their claim, crafting their introductions and conclusions, categorizing their evidence, and incorporating literary terms. This bend will be quick, lasting only several days, to leave time for students to cycle through the writing process again in the final bend.

  *How can I draft, revise and edit an essay that clearly supports my idea about a text?*

- **Bend III: (Draft and Revise Essays with Increased Independence),** children will draft a second (or third) literary essay, this time doing so with increased independence. You might decide to spend a shorter or longer amount of time on this bend, depending on how your students did cycling through the first two bends, though we recommend moving quickly, having students flash-draft and then revise on the run, before editing and publishing their final piece to great fanfare and celebration.

  *How can I use everything I know to write a second literary essay, this time working with more independence?*
Gather Texts for Students

For children to write about reading this way, you will need to decide which piece(s) of literature your children will study in the unit. If your students are in a reading workshop and talking about the deeper meanings of texts in book clubs or partnerships, you might use literary essays as a way to harvest their interpretations of those books and to cross-pollinate your reading and writing workshops. If you decide to pair this with the reading unit then Mystery Series Clubs will be the direction you will take. On the other hand, book club work is not essential to this unit. Your students might write literary essays about any short story, novel, or picture book that you and the children have discussed. You will want to choose the easiest possible texts for children’s foray into literary essays. It is reasonable to ask whether writing about chapter books or picture books is an easier challenge. In some ways it is easiest for children to write about a short text; in other ways this is more difficult. Certainly when youngsters write about a short text, it is easier for them to know that text really well, rereading it several times and mining it in conversations with others. They can also locate evidence easily without spending lots of time finding excerpts. On the other hand, any theory a child might espouse will have thinner substantiating support when the text is short. For example, it is far easier to supply evidence supporting the claim that that Encyclopedia, in Encyclopedia Brown Cracks the Case, by Donald J. Sobol is courageous because the reader is apt to find evidence across one-hundred-plus pages of text, or perhaps even across several books in the series. You will need to decide whether children will write literary essays about short texts they have read during writing workshop or about longer texts they have read and discussed during reading workshop.

First and foremost, be sure your children are writing about texts they not only care about, but can read with accuracy. In this instance, the writers’ first choice is the text; their second choice is what to say about it. The texts you offer as options might be ones you and your class have studied throughout the year. There is nothing to be gained by introducing unfamiliar ones. Provide stories that are rich, complex, and well-crafted enough that they reward close study. If you are not concerned with having children write only about mystery novels, The Stories Julian Tells, by Ann Cameron, offers a collection of good options. Eve Bunting’s picture books are also very rich. The possibilities are endless.

You will also probably select one mentor text for whole-class work, threading this one story through many minilessons, using your (and the class’s) responses to it to show children how people go about reading, thinking, and writing about a story. You’ll chart what you do with that story, using words that can apply to any writer and any text, and
those charts will remind children of the work they can do with their own stories. Again, one way to support children who struggle is to do some work with the text that you hope they will use as the centerpiece of their inquiries. We recommend referring to the reading unit to support this unit. One book we recommend using is Encyclopedia Brown Cracks the Case by Donald J. Sobol, as it offers opportunities for supporting both the reading work (during read aloud) and writing work children are doing this month.

**Anticipate the Trajectory of Your Students’ Work throughout the Unit**

You will need to decide from the outset how much time you are going to spend in each part of the unit. The unit is meant to be a quick one, with a week on the first two bends. You can decide how long the final bend should be. It could be longer. In any case, we recommend finishing the unit by having your students write at least one and probably more fast drafts of literary essays.

However you proceed, plan to celebrate the children’s achievements at the end of the unit. You might have students lay their first and second literary essays side by side and visit one another’s writing, complimenting as they go. Or you might set up a rotating display in the classroom that highlights the books as well as the essays, with the literary essays tucked inside the books about which they were written. You might also give the students’ opinions a larger, broader audience by posting the essays on Goodreads.com or another literature blog.

**Bend 1: Generate Ideas about Literature**

*Channel students to write lots of entries about a selected text*

On each of the first few days of the unit, you might decide to demonstrate a way of reading and writing about a story and then invite children to use that way of reading as they work with whichever text they choose from their packets. (Ask children to make that choice right away, so all the writing they do over the next few days sets them up for the essay they will soon write.) You might teach children that just as essayists pay attention to their lives, expecting to generate ideas from this wide-awake attentiveness, literary essayists pay attention to texts. Remind students that they already know parts of literature worth paying attention to (characters, favorite parts, titles, lessons), and consider consulting Session 9 in the second grade unit, *Writing About Reading*, for more on this. It is particularly effective to teach...
students that a reader can capture an image or a line or a passage that stays with him after he finishes reading a story and then try to explain why that one bit of the text is the part that lingers in his mind. How does that one part fit with the whole story? Because text citation is so important to the CCSS, you would be wise to teach students that writers can pull out one line or a couple of lines of text and copy them onto a page of a notebook and then write to help them figure out why they found those words or that part so powerful. Again, it will be important for writers to explore how the statement fits into the story as a whole.

You might also teach writers that it can pay off to record a turning point in the book and explore how this moment fits into the whole book or to write about how they might live differently if they took the story really seriously. Of course, you will not want to suggest a strategy, show it, and then expect every writer to use that strategy to explore a text. Instead, you will want to teach a few strategies for growing ideas about a text and then invite writers to draw from that repertoire of possible strategies, using one, then another, as they see fit. It can help to teach writers that there are tricks to anything, and one of the tricks that a literary essayist calls upon is that she knows in advance that there are some parts of a story that tend to provide a rich ground for analysis. These potentially rich parts of a text include moments of character change, the lessons characters are learning, and the issues (personal or social) characters are facing. As always, you will only want to devote a day or two to teaching students strategies for generating ideas about their reading, and then you’ll want to help them write well about those ideas.

By now, you will want to lift the level of your students’ writing about reading. As part of this, you will probably encourage them to go back to entries they have written within the last week and elaborate on these. This means that you might channel children to select bits of their writing—whole entries or portions of an entry—and try to elaborate on those ideas, just as they earlier selected bits from the books they are discussing. For children to say more about a text, encourage them not only to think more, but also to see more. They should be growing their ideas by studying the text, noticing evidence for their ideas, and thinking about that evidence. That is, if writers select the text fairly early on, the generating and collecting they do henceforth will be work that sets them up for their eventual essay. Your next mission is to help them grow and eventually choose between some ideas about the selected text. Writers can look closely at the text they’ve selected and write, “I see . . .” followed by something that they notice in the text. Encourage them to write long about this, extending their observations by using prompts to jump-start their thinking: “This makes
me think . . .” “I wonder . . .” “The surprising thing about this is . . .” “The important thing about this is . . .” “The thought this gives me is . . .” “I wonder whether . . .” Earlier this year, in Changing the World, children learned to write about reasons and evidence as they explore ideas, and this is something you can channel them to do now, as they elaborate. You might also consider reading over Session 8 from the second grade unit, Writing About Reading, which is designed to help children reread closely to generate more writing by paying attention to details that others might pass by and using those details to grow new thinking.

Children are used to extending their thinking by providing examples. Support that work, and help them to mine those examples for the specific ways they actually relate to the initial idea. Simply referencing an example is an important part. Including a line that reads, “This shows . . .” and then showing how the example illustrates the point is much better work. You’ll also want to encourage them to provide more than one example when supporting an idea, often rereading to find additional parts of a text that support an idea.

Be aware that children are apt to try to extend their thinking only by providing examples; therefore, you will want to encourage them to linger with their ideas, too. Teach them to record an idea using new words, writing, “That is . . .” or “In other words . . .” and then rephrasing the idea. Teach them to entertain possibilities by completing the prompts “Could it be that . . .” or “Perhaps . . .” or “Some may say that . . .” Words and phrases such as “Furthermore . . .”, “This connects with . . .”, “On the other hand . . .”, “But you might ask . . .”, “This is true because . . .”, or “I am realizing that . . .” can also keep children elaborating on their ideas. If you hope that children will write literary essays in which they articulate the lessons they believe a character learns or name the theme or idea a story teaches, it is important that you provide children with strategies for generating these sorts of ideas.

You might use fantastic writing about ideas generated by some of your students as powerful mentors to help all your writers visualize what it is you are pushing them to do. These entries may also inspire you to create minilessons that spotlight your students’ work. You might consider making a mid-workshop teaching point in which you ask the class to analyze what makes the work of one of their classmates shine. This will help them articulate the moves they too should be making in their writing. As your students continue to elaborate, you will want to remind them of the ways they are already familiar with for thinking about characters and the work they do as readers. You might ask them to revisit
any writing they have been doing all along about their reading, asking themselves, “What ideas have I grown already about this text?”

**Have students decide on one idea to develop into a mini-essay**

Next you will want to teach children to reread their notebook entries to find seed ideas. You might ask them to look for a seed idea that is central to the story and is provocative, perhaps referring back to the big, bold opinions they generated in *Changing the World*. You can also help children generate possible claims or thesis statements or ideas about the text. Whatever structure a child chooses, you will need to help him or her revise the seed idea so that it is a clear thesis—a claim or an opinion, not a fact, phrase, or question. Before teaching into this work, you need to know that the Common Core State Standards expect students to write opinions or claims and to supply reasons or examples to support the opinions or claims but do not expect third-graders to coordinate all those layers of development. That is, according to the CCSS, it is okay for a third-grader to claim that Encyclopedia Brown is courageous, and then to elaborate on this by telling about three *times* when he is courageous or, alternatively, about three *ways* he is courageous, but the CCSS do not expect third-graders to write with a cascading organizational structure, which might lead to the child claiming in her thesis statement, “Encyclopedia is courageous for two reasons. “He is courageous because believes in doing the right thing, and he is courageous because he puts other peoples’ well-being ahead of his own,” and then to develop each of those reasons with several examples. This type of organizational structure, where the writer plans the entire essay up front, laying out the reasons that support the thesis or claim in the thesis statement and then elaborating on each supporting reason in the body paragraphs is what is expected of fourth-graders according to the CCSS. The organizational structure that is expected for third-graders when writing about reading is no different than what they did when writing essays in the *Changing the World* unit. It is entirely okay for a child to make a claim, come up with one reason, write about that reason, and then only at that point think, “What other reason can I come up with?”, adding a transitional phrase and then continuing with another reason or piece of evidence.

Still, there are ways in which it is just as easy for writers to make a claim that, from the start, meets requirements for fourth- and fifth-grade CCSS. Some of your writers might make a claim about a character or a text, perhaps giving reasons for that claim straightaway or perhaps doing so as they proceed along, writing the essay. “So and so is a good friend.” “So and so changes the family [the town, the classroom, the school] from this way to that way.” “This is about so and so, who learns/turns out to be/changes to be/becomes such-and-such by the end. When children go to elaborate, one of the easiest
ways for them to do so is to divide their essays up so they write about how their ideas hold true across the text. The first body paragraph can claim, “In the beginning . . . ,” and then the next can start, “Later in the text . . . ,” and of course, the final body paragraph can start, “By the end of the text . . . .” Alternatively, writers may want to write “journey of thought” essays: “At first I thought . . . but now I realize . . . .” Students may write, “When I first read [story title], I thought it was about [the external, plot-driven story], but now, rereading it, I realize it is about [the internal story].” Or “Some people think [story title] is about [the external plot], but I think it is really about [the deeper meaning].”

Other students may want to write a thesis statement like this: “My feelings about story/character/theme are complicated. On the one hand, I think . . . On the other hand, I think . . . .” With this structure, students can explore how their feelings or ideas about a story, character, or theme are conflicted. The reader feels more than one thing at the same time. “My feelings about Encyclopedia Brown are complicated. On the one hand I think he is courageous, but on the other hand I think that he makes choices that are dangerous and not smart.” Implicit in many of these thesis statements is the plan for the essay, but remember, this is not essential for third-graders. Still, if the statement is “My feelings about such-and-such are complicated,” then “On the one hand, I think . . . ” and “On the other hand, I think . . . ” become the topic sentences for separate paragraphs. If the thesis is “At first I thought . . . then I realized,” those elements, too, set up the organizational structure of the essay.

Regardless of which options you and the children choose, we recommend pulling out the many charts and resources you relied on in Changing the World to remind children of expository structures, transitional phrases, prompts for expressing ideas/reasons/evidence, and the like.

### Bend II: Support and Craft the Arguments

**Teach students to find evidence**

Once children have planned their literary essays, they will need to collect the information and insights needed to build the case. You might decide to encourage each child to make a file or a booklet (on which they write on one side only) for each big subtopic the child plans to discuss in the essay. For example, if the child’s claim is Donald J Sobol’s story “Encyclopedia Brown is the story of a courageous boy who learns to speak up to bullies” the child might title one file “Encyclopedia is a courageous boy” and another “Encyclopedia learns to speak up.” Each of these files will become a paragraph (or more) in the final essay. On the other hand, students can work their evidence into their draft immediately, one paragraph on one page and another paragraph on another page.
You might teach children to gather evidence for each subordinate point by retelling a part of the story that supports that idea, then “unpacking” that part by writing about how it illustrates the idea. If you teach them to do this, you will need to help them angle their retelling so it fits the idea. Session 4 from Writing About Reading will help you to design the ways in which you teach children to retell and angle bits of text in support of an idea. You will also need to teach writers how to quote from a text and then unpack the quote by talking about how it addresses the relevant big idea, and may consider looking at Session 13 to help you with this. Before this unit is over, you may want to teach children that writers of literary essays use the vocabulary of their trade, incorporating literary terms such as narrator, point of view, scenes, and the like.

**Drafting**

There are several alternatives for how you might teach children to take what they have collected and turn it into a cohesive essay draft. First, you’ll want to teach children to lay all their evidence before them, determining which stories, quotes, and bits of expository writing best support their ideas. Then, using only what they decide to include, writers can literally construct an essay by taping the pieces together. You’ll want to teach them to use transitional phrases at the beginning of paragraphs and between examples. This may be something you teach them as they draft or save for a revision minilesson. Alternatively, as with most units before this, you might have children fast-draft their essays. They’ll still lay their evidence before them, choosing the best pieces for their essay, but instead of eliminating and taping, they’ll reference this evidence as they draft their essays from beginning to end on lined paper. If students struggle with organization, you may want to revisit Session 8 of Changing the World, reminding students that writers can reread their work, underline sentences that go together using a color-coded system, name the category, and then write each of their categories (or in this case, body paragraphs), across different sheets of draft paper.

If you use Encyclopedia Brown Cracks the Case as a mentor and have read up to Chapter Two, “The Case of the Autographed Alice in Wonderland,” your model essay might sound something like this:

*In the mystery, Encyclopedia Brown Cracks the Case, by Donald J. Sobol, Encyclopedia Brown learns that in life, it is important to stand up to bullies. It’s important to stand up to bullies.*
when they bully others. It’s important to stand up to bullies when they bully you.

In the beginning, Melissa Stevens is easily swindled into releasing her beloved Tiger Book. In the text it states, "Bugs Meany talked me into trading my Taffy the Tiger for it," Melissa said. "I didn’t want to at first, but he said there was a tea party in the book. And that it was worth a whole bunch of money because the author signed it. But there’s no tea party.” This shows how Bugs tricked poor Melissa lying to her about the tea party, and Melissa fell for it. Now she is asking for Encyclopedia’s help instead of going straight to Bugs herself. Melissa should stand up to those bullies.

Later in the book, Encyclopedia gets involved. He was determined to help Melissa. However, once he gets there he realizes what he is up against--three bullies!! In the text it says, “he swallowed...., but he had promised to get Melissa’s book back.” This shows how difficult it was for Encyclopedia to stand up to these bullies--there was not one, but three, and Bugs was NOT nice. He repeatedly argued that the autograph on the book was real, forcing Encyclopedia to argue back.

By the end of the text, Encyclopedia proved that Bugs had tricked Melissa by forging the authors signature. Encyclopedia has Bugs to write Lewis Carroll’s name and when he did he spelled in Louis Carroll (just as the name written in the book.) But that is not how Lewis Carroll spells his name! This helps us to understand how Encyclopedia stood up to Bugs. In life, it is important to stand up to bullies. We should do it for others. We should do it for ourselves.

**Polishing Our Essays**

When teaching children to write introductory or concluding paragraphs, you'll want to remind them that essay writers state their opinions and forecast or sum up their reasons. You might teach them to write an introductory paragraph that includes a tiny summary of the story and then presents the thesis statement. The closing paragraph will probably link the story’s message to the writer’s own life. It’s a good place for a Hallmark moment! (“This story teaches me that I, too …”) An alternative is to link this story to another story or even to a social issue in the world. Also, as students revise their essays, they will want to read their drafts carefully—most likely with a writing partner—looking for places where there are gaps (in thinking or transitions) and filling those gaps as they revise. You’ll also want to study your students’ writing in relation to the opinion learning progression and note places where their essays are still in need of work. These “needs” become perfect revision strategies.

Finally, of course, you will want to teach your writers a lesson or two about editing their essays. First, you will build on the editing work children have done throughout the year, encouraging students to make smarter and smarter choices about paragraphing, ending
punctuation, and the like. This is also a great opportunity to teach verb tense, which often switches during an essay. That is, when children are discussing their thinking, they sometimes use present tense (“Encyclopedia is courageous”), and when they are retelling, they sometimes switch to past tense (“Encyclopedia stood up to the bullies”). This can be confusing for your struggling writers, and you will want to be prepared to help them make good choices—and understand the choices they are making.

For a celebration of this first round of writing, you might have students share their writing with a small group and write quick compliments to each other. You might also consider making copies of their essays and tucking them into the book baskets in the library. As students go to a bin to pick a book, they can read a bit of their classmates’ thinking about the story.

Bend III: Draft and Revise Essays with Increased Independence

Cycle children through the writing process again, with increased independence

You will now want to spend a few days cycling your students through a fast version of the literary essay process. If your students did well the first time around, you’ll make this bend as independent as possible. Allow children to choose the books they will write about, and remind them of strategies for collecting ideas and evidence by hanging the charts you created earlier in the unit and in the year. Encourage students to develop a thesis quickly, moving immediately to the collecting of evidence. In this third bend, you’ll want to give them increased choice. Some children will create files again. Others may simply make little booklets (a few sheets of paper stapled together, their thesis on the first sheet, their first reason across the top of the second sheet, their second reason across the top of the next sheet, and so on). Strive to raise the level of the work children are doing. You’ll certainly want to teach children to use the opinion checklist to assess themselves. Teach them to note what they’ve done well and what they still need to work on and then set goals they can work toward. Remind them to use the various strategies you taught in Bend II, this time with increased autonomy and independence. We recommend keeping this bend rather short; the goal is to usher children quickly through the literary essay process. However, if your students struggled significantly in Bends I and II, you might decide to slow down and reteach some
of what you introduced a week or two ago. Regardless of the approach, students will end Bend III with a second draft. Plan to both celebrate and reflect on these drafts. If children leave this unit with clear goals in mind for essay writing, they will be well positioned to make a smooth transition into fourth-grade essay writing.