

**Teachers College Reading and Writing Project  
Writing Curricular Calendar, First Grade, 2014-2015  
Overview of the Year for First-Grade Writers**



## Overview of the Year for First-Grade Writers

September/ October	Unit One – Small Moments: Writing with Focus, Detail, and Dialogue
October/ November	Unit Two – Writing How-to Books
November/December	Unit Three – Nonfiction Chapter Books
January/ February	Unit Four – Writing Reviews
February/ March	Unit Five – Poetry and Songs
March/April	Unit Six – Writing Like Scientists
May/ June	Unit Seven – From Scenes to Series: Writing Fiction

This curricular plan stands on the shoulders of three decades of both research in the teaching of writing and actual classroom instruction and practice. This plan represents the best knowledge of a field of study that has become known as the “writing process approach to teaching writing.” Based on the principle that the scientific method underlies all that scientists do, so, too, there is a process that underlies all that writers do. Whether engaged in physics, chemistry, or floating and sinking work at the water table, the scientist engages in the scientific method. Similarly, whether working on a persuasive review or a poem, the writer engages in the writing process. The approach highlights the importance of direct and explicit instruction in the skills and strategies of proficient writing, of students engaging in frequent goal-driven practice which benefits from regular assessment-based feedback, and of close study of grade-level complex mentor texts.

This approach to teaching writing is so widely accepted that it has influenced almost every language arts textbook in the country. Even Warriners’ grammar text has chapters on the writing process approach!

This document outlines the TCRWP’s suggested curriculum for teaching writing in first grade. The curriculum provides students with an instructional pathway designed to improve their skills in the three genres of writing spotlighted in the Common Core State

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Standards: narrative, opinion, and information writing. Across the year, students will work in each of these kinds of writing with increasing sophistication and with decreasing reliance on scaffolds. For example, early in first grade, students will write information books based on personal expertise. Later in the year, they will revisit information books writing within a content area and employing more sophisticated text structures.

Although this document spotlights first grade, it is important to know that it is part of a K-8 spiral curriculum in writing. The curriculum detailed here assumes that your students participated in a writing workshop during kindergarten. Early in the year, one of the first goals of your teaching will be to remind students to bring all they already learned about writing from kindergarten to the work they are now doing. You'll use rubrics to remind children of what they already know how to do—and for you to quickly notice when you need to revisit the instruction they received earlier so their foundation for the work ahead is strong. Because the units of study are designed to build on one another, a teacher at any one grade level can always use the write-ups for preceding and following grades to develop some knowledge for ways to support writers who especially struggle and those who need enrichment. This sometimes takes a little research since the units do not always match up in each grade. It is critical that you modify this plan so that your teaching takes into account the data from your students.

As always, these units are provided as suggestions for you to study with your colleagues. We would never imagine that any of you would use these or any other resources blindly; instead we are certain you will sometimes add and subtract as you devise teaching that supports your growing writers.

This curriculum is further detailed in the series *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing, Grade 1* (Heinemann 2013), which contains the minilessons, small-group work, conferring, and teacher- and child-facing rubrics that undergird much of this year-long curriculum in teaching writing to first graders. This document is also grounded in the teaching of the DVD, *Big Lessons from Small Writers*, which contains twenty-two videos that illustrate this curriculum ([www.unitsofstudy.com](http://www.unitsofstudy.com)), as well as the TCRWP's video compilation of Common Core-aligned teaching, available to all at [www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com).

Those of you who worked with the TCRWP's curricular plans from 2013–2014 will notice that we have upheld certain features from last year and maintained fewer units in all. This allows you more time to conduct, analyze and use the assessments that you take. This will also give your students more time to acquire, practice, learn and build the skills that they need this year. The sequence of units has also remained the same.

You will notice that we continue to recommend you launch the school year with personal

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narratives, starting with a well-loved unit on small moment writing. This year, this first narrative unit is followed by a unit of study in October/November on procedural writing (How-to books), giving young writers continued opportunities to write sequenced pieces with increased focus and clarity. The third unit of the year, in November/December, invites children to compose a series of nonfiction books, designed to support writers' ability to categorize their information and ideas into well-structured chapters.

In January and February, we recommend you give children support in opinion writing—specifically, writing persuasively. This unit engages first graders in judging collections, before moving on to the work of writing reviews. The February/March unit is a study of poetry in all its glorious forms. (We recognize that some of you might make the choice of moving poetry to April to coincide with National Poetry Month, as some of you did during the 2013–2014 year.)

Then in March/April, you will return to informational writing. This time, children will write information books linked directly to content area work in science. Finally, the year wraps up with a unit on narrative writing that builds on the foundation established earlier in the year. During this unit, children will write realistic fiction stories, creating characters and imagining adventures these character will go on across a series of books!

Throughout these plans, there are many opportunities for students to engage in close study of the grade-level complex texts that function as mentor texts for a given unit of study. You will see that we have paid enormous attention to ensuring that students have opportunities to engage in work that places high levels of cognitive demand on them. They are continually asked to transfer what they learn while working in one text or one genre to another text, another genre. Students engage in inquiries, evaluating mentor texts, their own writing, and writing created by peers. They also set goals for themselves and receive assistance in working with resolve towards these.

## Assessments

We recognize that the first graders entering your classroom will bring a wide range of skills—some will still be fledgling writers while others will be ready for anything you put before them. Your teaching will need to be especially assessment-based and designed to support this diversity. We encourage you to skim the documents the TCRWP has written for kindergartners and second graders, because those will help you understand ways you can support both your struggling and your strongest writers.

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At the very beginning of the year, and prior to beginning any unit, we encourage you to conduct on-demand assessments of students' abilities to write in the three genres—narrative, opinion and information—and to use this data as a way to plan your instruction. The curriculum set out in these units is integrated into an assessment system, available in *Writing Pathways* (an accompaniment to the *Units of Study* series), which includes three learning progressions, one in each type of writing, as well as grade-by-grade checklists, grade-specific rubrics, and three benchmark texts illustrating at-standards-level, on-demand opinion, information, and narrative writing.

An early version of this assessment system has been piloted in thousands of classrooms, and the entire system has been revised based on feedback. Essentially, in this system, K–8 teachers begin the school year by asking students to spend forty-five minutes writing an on-demand narrative, and on other days, to spend similar time writing an on-demand information text and opinion text. In most schools, teachers decide that in each instance, students will merely be told to do their best writing. A teacher might say to her students, for example, “You have forty-five minutes to write your best personal narrative, Small Moment story, true story, or piece of short fiction—your best narrative. Write in a way that shows me all you know about narrative writing.” Some schools prefer the prompt to be much more clearly delineated, with all the expectations spelled out. We provide schools with both ways to word the tasks so you may choose the method you prefer.

Each student's work is then scored against a learning progression and an accompanying set of sample student texts in each genre that have been benchmarked to represent each level of the learning progression. For example, a teacher can read the introduction in one child's information text, asking, “Does this match expectations for a first-grade introduction? A second-grade introduction? A kindergarten one?” (There is also a way for teachers to characterize the piece as 1.5 or 2.5.) Then, he or she can teach the class a unit on information writing, giving students ample opportunities to assess themselves at the beginning, middle, and end of the unit against crystal clear checklists that spell out the goals they should be working toward. After the unit is completed, the on-demand assessment is repeated, and students' work is again scored. Presumably, teachers will teach more than one unit in each of the three major kinds of writing, and the on-demands can be given periodically again later in the year to continue to track students' progress.

The most important thing about the learning progressions and performance assessments is that they enable teachers and students to grasp where students are in their writing development so that teachers can figure out ways to give children the help they need to move toward next steps. The assessment system that undergirds this curriculum is meant as an instructional tool. It makes progress in writing as transparent, concrete, and attainable as possible and puts ownership for this progress into the hands of learners. This

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assessment system clarifies the Common Core State Standards, allowing students and teachers to work toward a very clear image of what good writing entails.

We also encourage you to assess students' growing control of spelling and recommend administering Donald Bear's Developmental Spelling Inventory detailed in *Words Their Way* as well as the Letter and Sound Identification Assessment which is part of the TCRWP Assessments ([www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com)). In your students' on-demand pieces you may see some evidence of letter/sound correspondence, concept of word, as well as (in some cases) the ability to write in full sentences. Familiarize yourself with all that your students know about letters and sounds as well as discrete features of phonics.

Conducting a letter and sound identification assessment will reveal what letters and sounds to expect in student writing as well as which ones you need to teach. Some teachers discover that small groups (or their whole class) are ready for an spelling inventory. Some teachers wait until their second unit of study to conduct their spelling inventory. Whenever you decide to assess your spellers, you will need to count not the words but the features that are correct. This information will help you decide what to teach in your phonics/word study time, and it will also give you valuable information about how to help your first grade students with spelling during writing workshop.

Then you will be able to plan your whole-class spelling instruction so that it is aligned with the main needs you see across your class and also differentiated for your struggling and strongest spellers. Over the course of the year, in each unit of study, we have outlined key spelling features to work on with your students to help align your word study work with writer's workshop. Of course, if your students enter well above or below grade level, you may want to adjust which features you teach to better respond to their needs. The foundational skills section in the Common Core will also help you align your concepts about print, spelling, and phonics work so as to build a coherent word study program in your school. In writing workshop, your students will have ample time to learn and practice these skills as well as those described in the language standards.

In addition to spotlighting spelling, you will also teach students how to edit for capitalization, punctuation, grammar and spelling, both as they write and as they publish. As students write across genres, they will have opportunities to demonstrate command over many of the conventions of standard English grammar, capitalization, punctuation and spelling. This supports the expectations of the Common Core State Standards in language that first graders use grammatical structures such as adjectives, verbs, conjunctions and prepositions, as well as capitalization and punctuation.

You will also want to assess your writers' command over the mechanics and conventions for writing. Use the lens of the language standards in the Common Core to help you

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understand which conventions of written language your children use with automaticity whenever they write. To understand this, look at their on-demand pieces of writing. Ask yourself questions such as, “Which children write with ending punctuation?” and “Which children write with appropriate uppercase and lowercase letters?” This will help to determine where you want to start with whole class instruction of conventions and what work you would like to do in small groups.

## Special Words of Advice

We have three suggestions for how to lift the level of your writing workshops in the year ahead. First, when your children come into first grade they may seem young, but it is important for you to acknowledge the fact that many of them have come from kindergarten classrooms in which they have learned to write books that span multiple pages. They have studied and implemented mentor author techniques in their writing, written poems and how-to and all-about books and stories, and then finished the year with folders bursting with writing. When they were in kindergarten they probably wrote at least three or four texts a week. Your first graders will certainly write two to three texts a week. The more mature writers will write two a week, and those texts will have paragraphs, not just sentences, on each page. Remember, the younger children are, the more texts they’ll tend to write! Make sure your students begin this year by writing in three- or four-page booklets. Additionally, students will have already learned many revision techniques so they do not need to wait before beginning to make significant revisions to their drafts. Certainly you will want to give each table a supply of single sheets so that students can add more pages to their books.

Second, it is important that children are given opportunities to do work of a high cognitive demand. You can introduce a new kind of text—say, a how-to text—by saying to students, “Will you study this text and notice the ways in which it is different from the narratives you were just writing? Think about what you will need to do to write a how-to text like this one.” Then you can send students off to show what they can do. Don’t worry if the work many kids produce suggests they were unable to independently analyze the new kind of writing. You can follow the invitation to engage in an inquiry with more explicit and supported instruction. Give them opportunities to evaluate their own writing and to draw from a repertoire of possible techniques the ones most suited to their needs. Give them chances to self-assess their work to note ways in which it does and does not meet the criteria, and then invite them to set goals for themselves.

In your minilessons, remind writers of all the options they have to draw upon during any one day’s writing workshop. Don’t expect that the work children will do on any one day will

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be solely what you taught during that day's teaching point! If you taught writers that characters can actually talk, and that writers might add quotes or speech bubbles, you should expect children to write up a storm, using details and adding feelings, and anything else they have already learned, in addition to making characters talk.

One way to be sure your teaching gives students opportunities to do work that is at a high level of cognitive demand is to ask students to use conferences show you what they already know, and can do, during conferences. For example, if you decide through your research that you'd like to confer to teach a particular writer to show, not tell, instead of simply plunging into that instruction, you may want to first say to the writer, "If I were to suggest that you show not tell on this page of your book, can you tell me how you would do that?" Then you can respond to what that student demonstrates she can already do, noting ways in which her work was effective and ways she could take it further.

And as you confer, much of the instruction will come in response to the data that is before you. If you sense that instead, you are moving among students, spoon-feeding them a bite-sized version of that day's minilesson, you will want to step back and reexamine your instruction. Make sure that at least half of your conferences arise in response to your study of student work, and that when you do study student work, you look at the extent to which students are drawing on all that you have taught over the course of the year and not just on the instruction of that day.

Third, when planning your units of study, draw on the writing pieces that you have received from last year's kindergarten teacher. This way, the work you do in first grade won't repeat kindergarten work, but will instead build upon it. Your instruction across the day should remind students that they have now graduated and are ready to rise to the challenge of first graders.