Fourth Grade Writing Calendar

September	*Raising the Level of Personal Narrative Writing*
October	*Personal Essay*
November	*Realistic Fiction*
December	*Writing to Learn*
January	*Historical Fiction*
February	*Poetry*
March April	*Literary Essay* *Test prep*
May	*Content-area writing (social studies)*
June	*Revision*

This curricular calendar suggests one possible way of imagining the writing curriculum for the fourth grade classrooms across a school. You will see that we suggest month-long units of study and that the design of this suggested curriculum places a premium on supporting youngsters' growing abilities to write narrative and expository (or persuasive) pieces. There are also units supporting poetry and writing-to-learn across the curriculum.

This curriculum was fashioned with input from hundreds of teachers, coaches, and principals, and it stands especially on the shoulders of Calkins' *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3-5* (Heinemann, 2006), a series of books that conveys the minilessons that Calkins and co-authors gave while teaching many of these units of study. The published series also shows the conferring, mid-workshop interruptions and teaching shares that filled Calkins' and co-authors' teachings. This curricular calendar takes into account the New York State ELA exam, the New York state's standards and the Common Core standards. If you teach in a state other than New York, you will need to adjust this sequence of work according to your state's assessments.

This yearlong course of study is part of a K-8 spiraling curriculum in which students receive instruction in narrative, expository, informational, poetic, and procedural writing across their school experience. This instruction enables students to work in each of these fundamental modes with increasing sophistication and decreasing reliance on scaffolds. For example, first graders write 'small moment stories' by recalling an event and retelling it "across their fingers," whereas third graders may plot narratives against the graphic organizer of a blank booklet, a time-line, or a story mountain, with the goal of including two small-moments (or scenes). By third grade, children will revise the pieces so that beginnings and endings relate to what the story is *really* about. Stories by middle school students may be more metaphorical, using concrete details to convey abstract ideas. In a similar manner, from kindergarten through eighth grade, students become progressively more capable of writing expository texts. In second grade, for example, children make and substantiate claims in persuasive letters--by third grade, they learn to consider contrary views, to argue for their point of view. Because the units of study are designed to build upon 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 especially need enrichment.

While the suggested curriculum varies according to grade level, supporting increasing sophistication and independence, it is also true that the essential skills of great writers remain consistent whether the writer is seven years old, seventeen, or seventy for that matter. All of us try again and again to write with focus, detail, grace, structure, clarity, insight, honesty, and increasing control of conventions, and all of us do so by rehearsing, planning, studying exemplar texts, drafting, rereading, revising, re-imagining, and editing.

There is nothing haphazard in this sequence of units of study for writing. Still, there are many other ways that teachers *could* plan their writing curriculum. We lay out this course of study for a few reasons. First, we believe it is a wise trajectory, one that stands on the shoulders of the work these children have done in the preceding years and one that prepares them for later work. Because this journey of study was fashioned with lots of input and lots of thought, and because it develops essential skills that youngsters need, we believe this sequence of units is worth careful consideration. Another reason we lay out this single line of work is that the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project's conference days and coaching courses cannot provide close support for hundreds of different iterations of a writing curriculum. Therefore, we want to alert you that during the year ahead, the Project's writing-related conference days for fourth grade teachers will prepare for and support this line of work. Conference days will generally precede a unit of study by at least a week. The study groups that we lead for coaches and principals will also support this trajectory of work. People interested in attending conference days related to a particular unit of study are asked to refer to our website--these days are open to all who register, providing there is space.

On the other hand, nothing matters more in your teaching than your own personal investment in it. Modify this plan as you see fit so that you feel a sense of ownership over your teaching. We do encourage you, however, to work in sync with colleagues on your grade level so that your teaching can benefit from the group's cumulative knowledge. Ideally, this will mean that your

grade-level meetings become occasions for swapping minilessons, planning lessons in ways that inform your teaching, assessing children's work, and planning ways to respond to their needs.

Assessment

Who was it who said, "We inspect what we respect?" It will be important for you to assess your students' growth in writing using a number of different lenses to notice what students can do. As part of this, we encourage you to start off the year by giving students Donald Bear's spelling inventory, which we describe in the section below on conventions of written language. The TCRWP also recommends you use the assessment tool we have developed and piloted to track student growth in narrative writing. This tool is still a work-in-progress. The newest versions of it will always be available on the TCRWP Web site at readingandwritingproject.com. We invite you and your colleagues to tweak and alter the instrument to fit your purposes. We especially recognize that it would be helpful to add more levels so that growth in writing can become more apparent. We invite you to work with your colleagues to do so -- and share what you create with the organization! Clearly, a similar tool needs to be developed to track growth in nonfiction writing--we have not done so in part because nonfiction writing comes in such varied forms that it is not easy to develop a single through line. In any case, we hope the Narrative Continuum helps you hold yourself accountable to supporting growth in writing, and it can help clarify the pathways along which developing writers travel. We know it can help you identify where a child is in a sequence of writing development, and imagine realistic, do-able next steps for each child. This can make your conferring much more helpful and your teaching clearer. What began as an *assessment* tool has become an extraordinarily important *teaching* tool!

Having said this, be cautious because there are times when the assessment tool seems to have made teaching less responsive to writers' intentions. If the tool leads you to approach a child, in the midst of writing, and to bypass listening and responding to that child, leading you to look only at the draft itself, then the tool will make your teaching worse, not better. Conferences always need to begin with a teacher pulling alongside a writer and asking, "What are you working on as a writer?" and "What are you trying to do?" and "What are you planning to do next?" and then the teacher needs to help the writer reach towards his or her intentions. We do this drawing on all we know not only about good writing, but also about how narrative or non-narrative writers tend to develop. This is where the assessment tool can be a resource.

If you do decide to use the Narrative Continuum or some other tool to track writers' growth, it is absolutely crucial that your first assessments occur at the very start of your year. Your children come to you with competencies and histories as writers. You cannot teach well unless you take the time to learn what they already know and can do. Then, too, if you capture the data representing what children can do at the very start of the year, you will be in a position to show parents and others all the ways in which children have grown as writers over the course of the year. In autumn parent-teacher conferences, bring the writing a child did on the first day of school and contrast it with the writing the child did just before the conference. To do this, it is crucial that you capture the 'Before' picture for comparison to the 'After.'

Even if you are not going to use the Narrative Continuum to assess growth in writing, we think you will want to get some baseline data on your writers. To do this, at the very the beginning of

the year, devote one full day's writing workshop – specifically fifty minutes – to an on-demand assessment of narrative writing. We cannot stress enough that you **cannot** scaffold kids' work during this assessment. Do *not* remind children of the qualities of good narrative writing, do *not* share examples of powerful texts, and definitely do *not* confer with writers. This needs to be a **hands-off** assessment. Say to your children, "I'm dying to get to know you as writers. Would you take today's writing workshop—you can have a full fifty minutes if you want —and write a focused personal narrative, a small-moment true story, which shows what you know about writing? Write about one time when you did something particular, something you remember well." Repeat those exact instructions more than once, and copy them down so you use the same instructions later in the year when you ask children to do the same thing, and notice what they have learned. Say, "Usually I confer with you and you confer with each other, but for today, I want to learn what you can do when you are on your own as a writer. So just do your best – remember that you will be writing a focused personal narrative, a small-moment true story, a piece which shows what you know about writing."

Some schools may decide to give children a second day to revise and edit, and as long as that is a school-wide, or district-wide decision, it might be a reasonable option. However, we advise against this, and suggest you will want to repeat this on-demand assessment several times across the year and so recommend that you ask for the work to be done in a single day. You could argue that no one day of writing can possibly show how children revise, and that is true--but the folders full of students' drafts will show this. And you can certainly learn a lot from one day's writing. The overarching reason for confining this to one day, though, is that it will be easier for you to repeat this on-demand assessment periodically if it is not time consuming.

If you worry that saying, "Welcome to a new year. I want to begin by evaluating you" might seem harsh, you might soften this by saying that you can't wait until the end of September before having some of your children's writing to display on bulletin boards. Tell children that they won't have a chance to work long on the piece because you are so eager to have their stories up in the room, which is why they need to plan, draft, revise, and edit in just one day. The only problem with saying this is that sometimes the idea that these pieces will be displayed leads teachers to coach into them, to assist in the writing process--which utterly ruins the power of this as an assessment tool. The alternative is to tell children this writing is just for you to get to know them, and then to store it in their portfolios. But if you feel comfortable displaying their first draft writing, it's a nice idea to create a purpose for this initial assessment piece.

In any case, you will want to study what your children do when asked to write focused narratives—this will help you establish a base-line understanding of what your students know about the qualities of good narrative writing. You'll find that the narrative scale we give you has been designed with the TCRWP's instruction in mind so you may discover that your children's pieces don't really fall anywhere on the scale. This will most likely happen if the children are fairly adept writers but have never been taught to focus their narratives.

When you look over children's work, take note of whether children have been taught and are using rudimentary concepts. Look, for example, for evidence that children are writing *focused* narratives. Also look to see if they are writing structured pieces (for now this will usually mean

chronologically structured pieces). Can these pieces be described as stories? That is, does the main character (the writer, in this instance) proceed through a plot-line of actions and reactions? Are children *storytelling* rather than summarizing and commenting on events? Are they using dialogue and details? Writing with end punctuation? Developing their characters? Angling the story to highlight their focal point? Do they seem to care not only about *what* they write, but also about *how* they write it?

You will probably assess your children's narrative writing through another on-demand piece at the end of October (or whenever you complete this fall's work with narrative writing). You'll want to assess again after your work with fiction. You should see that even within just two months, your children will have developed in fairly dramatic ways, but you need not wait until you assess to see evidence of growth. Any entry that a child writes within the narrative units of study can give you a helpful window into a child's progress.

From the beginning of the year, you'll want to set up folders for each child containing his or her on-demand pieces, published pieces and others samples of writing from each Unit of Study. This is important not only for ongoing assessment and reporting to families at report card time, but also because some Units of Study (e.g. the revision study in June) will require students to draw from their previous work.

Spelling, Mechanics, and Conventions in the Writing Curricular Calendar

We recommend that every teacher take fifteen minutes at the start of the year, and periodically throughout the year, to assess students' growing control of spelling. Do so by giving your whole class what amounts to a spelling test, asking them to spell each of twenty-five words. We recommend the spelling inventories devised by Donald Bear that are available on the TCRWP Web site. After giving students the spelling inventory, you will need to count not the *words* correct but the *features* correct—this can take a few minutes for each child. The result is that you can channel your whole-class spelling and vocabulary instruction so that your teaching is aligned to the main needs you see across your class. It will also help you differentiate that instruction for your struggling and strongest spellers. Those of you who study with the TCRWP can expect conference days to support this important work.

Meanwhile, you will also want to determine across the fourth grade:

- Which children do and do not generally control end punctuation and lower/upper-case letters?
- Which children do and do not tend to write in paragraphs?
- Which children do and do not include direct dialogue and use quotation marks and other punctuation associated with dialogue?
- Which children do and do not generally control their verb tenses?
- Which children do and do not generally control subject-verb agreement so that the subjects and verbs are either plural or singular?

If you have children who do not use end punctuation roughly correctly, who do not write in paragraphs, who seem to sprinkle upper case letters randomly throughout their writing or who don't yet use quotation marks to set off direct dialogue, embed instruction in all these things into

your first two units of study. Establishing a long-term inquiry across the months on punctuation, capitalization, and verb usage is another way to support student growth in grammar. The hope is that many more of your children will do all of this (not perfectly but as a matter of course) by the time of your second on-demand writing assessment at the end of October. You'll first teach any of these skills by embedding them into editing work (though this may be editing of just an entry), and then you'll expect the instruction to affect drafting. For example, if children are not writing with end punctuation, teach them to read over their writing and to put a period where a thought or action ends—this will eliminate a lot of run-on sentences quickly and with a minimum of fuss. Then you can teach children to write by having a complete thought, saying it to themselves and then writing without pausing until they reach the end of that thought, whereupon they leave a period on the page. Most students speak in sentences; they can write them.

If your children do all these things and are using but confusing tenses and subject-verb agreement, you'll teach this more advanced work and expect children's command of it to progress more slowly. In either case, you will also want to be sure that your children are not boxed into simple sentence structures when they write. You may have children whose sentences all seem to go like this: A subject did something (perhaps to someone, with something.) 'I went to the park. I rode my bike. I got an ice cream. I came home.' These children may feel in their bones that the writing lacks something, and they may try to solve the problem by linking the simple sentences with conjunctions. But that doesn't solve the problem. Teach these children that it helps to tell when, how, under what conditions, with what thoughts in mind, the person did the something. That is, the sentences can now look like this: 'One sunny Saturday morning, I went to the park. Wanting to have some fun, I rode my bike. Not long after that, I got an ice cream. Then I came home.' It can also help to tell *how* one did something, and to tell about that activity. 'I went to the park, the one down the road from me. I rode my bike quickly, round and round in circles. I got an ice cream, a double scoop chocolate that melted all over me…'

For those of you wanting to understand syntactical complexity more, you may find it interesting to measure your children's syntactic maturity in writing by looking at the average length (the number of words) in the grammatical sentences that your children construct. Hunt calls these the "T-units" (Hunt, 1965). For instance, if a student writes: 'I went to the store. I bought some candy. I met Lisa,' these are three independent T-units (or simple sentences) and each one is short, with just a few words. This is simple syntax. This would still be written in T-units of four or five words if the sentences were linked with the word 'and' because a T-unit is the term for a *possible* sentence, whether or not the writer punctuates it as such. On the other hand, the number of T-units would double if the sentence went like this: 'When I went to the store, I bought some candy before I met Lisa.' Nowhere in that sentence is there a place where a period could have been added, so this is all one T-unit comprised of fourteen words. More complex syntax has more words within a T-unit. For example, the same sentence could contain yet more words per T-unit (and still be more complex): *'Yesterday I went to the store, where I bought some candy and met Lisa, who was glad to see me.'* Some writers who struggle with punctuation show complicated syntax, which is terrific. It is important for teachers to realize that correctness is not the only goal. A writer's growing ability to write complex sentences (with many words per T-unit, although don't talk T-units with kids) should also be celebrated. Writers with complex

syntax will make some errors, but these writers are still far more advanced then those who use correct punctuation but rely only on simple sentences.

Usually you will first teach mechanics during editing, after children have drafted and revised a piece and are preparing it for publication. But once you have taught a skill during editing—say, the skill of dividing a piece into paragraphs—then you need to hold children accountable for using that skill as they draft, or at least see that they are attempting to use it. For example, during the editing portion of unit one, you will probably teach all students to write in paragraph structure if they are not already doing so, teaching them some of the cues for narrative paragraphs such as when a new character enters, the time changes, or the setting changes. Paragraphing and the punctuation involved in dialogue will also fit naturally into this narrative unit of study. Writers who include lots of description will be more ready for clauses set off by commas. That is, children benefit most from instruction when it helps them to be more powerful as they work on projects they care about rather than studying mechanics in isolation.

One *crucial* point is that students will move through stages of using and confusing new constructs before they master them. This means that getting things slightly wrong can be a sign of growth. If we only 'fix' students' writing, or tell them to be 'correct,' then they may revert to simpler vocabulary and sentence structure that they are sure they know how to punctuate. For instance, when students first start moving into past tense, they may not know all the forms of irregular verbs and they may confuse some. If we emphasize only accuracy, they will revert to present tense or to safe verbs they know. In the same way, they may not dare write longer sentences if they're not sure how to punctuate them. Common stages of development include *unfamiliarity, familiarity and experimentation, using and confusing, mastery and control* (Bear, 2008).

In the second unit, teach students to recall these conventions as they turn to non-narrative writing. You may want to re-teach ending punctuation, showing how it affects the tone of non-narrative writing. You will want to re-teach paragraph structure in non-narrative writing as well. Some of this can be small group instruction. Always teach students to use all the conventions they have learned until now so that they are effective editors of their own and others' writing, and write drafts that are more accurate in terms of conventions.

Once students return to writing stories, it is a good time for them to write and punctuate more complicated sentences, doing so in an effort to cue readers into how to read their writing with lots of mood and expressiveness. They will benefit if they have opportunities to pay attention to punctuation in reading, read-aloud, and shared reading. This fluency work, done in the guise of pursuing prosody, can help readers see more meaning in the text just because of the way it is read. If needed, you might form small groups around any convention that merits more attention. For example, in a small group you can help students who get confused distinguishing singular and plural pronouns, or apostrophes for possessives and contractions.

<u>Changes From Last Year to This Year</u>

This year you will see that the units have remained in roughly the same sequence as the previous year, but we have made many changes in the details of the units. You'll see that we move from

narrative to essay--we believe you could show students how to work their stories into their essays. We have made the essay unit much faster, adding a whole new spin: the 'research essay.' We added a unit on writing-to-learn in which we suggest teaching students to summarize, compare and contrast and write analytically, doing all this thinking work quickly. Our hope is that a unit developing these skills will allow you to ask students to write across the curriculum. There is a new unit on poetry writing--one of our favorites. The literary essay unit includes a large section on compare and contrast essays. The content area writing unit was revised in important ways.

We have updated the unit descriptions to share with you some of our latest thinking, and hope this will be helpful to you as you plan and create your units for this year. Remember that we present this calendar as one optional and suggested progression. We are aware that you and your colleagues may well make choices that are different than those we present here, and we welcome those choices. A year from now, we'd love to hear your suggestions for variations on this theme! If you devise a new unit of study that you are willing to share with other teachers, please send it to Lucy Calkins at: contact@readingandwritingproject.com.