

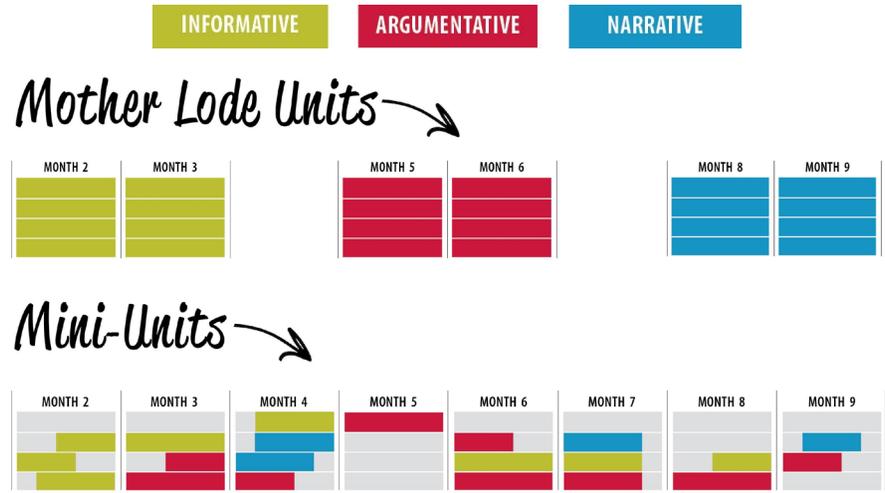
Utilize a scaffold of mini-units to teach writing modes

Deliver the core writing curriculum using mini-units, not the "mother lode"

Writing curriculums teach students to generate grade-level appropriate versions of persuasive/argumentative, informative, and narrative writing. However, the individual teacher determines how the units are structured throughout the year.

Many teachers execute an all-inclusive unit that starts with a lot of front-loading and culminates with a single final draft several weeks later.

If this method is considered a "mother-lode" approach, consider the possibility of executing "mini-units." The value of mini-units is that they utilize a spiral-instruction approach where students experience a particular type of writing in multiple, smaller doses. In the first "mini-unit," they may learn a couple of writing skills and then create a first-draft product. Then, a little later in the school year, they review those skills, learn another one or two, and generate another *new* first draft.



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This mini-unit approach is cumulative and breaks the single "mother-lode" unit into several smaller units that are spread across the school year.

There are several advantages to the mini-unit approach to curriculum planning.

1. Students experience variety.

During a single, all-inclusive writing unit that happens at one time during the year, teachers often feel pressured to teach everything. This takes time—lots of mini-lesson time. Then, each of these "mother-lode" units tends to end with a "mother-lode" product, meaning students spend many days engaged in the writing process. This takes even more time. Such units can drag on—often longer than the teacher anticipated.

However, with shorter, spiraled mini-units, students experience the three major writing modes all year long, providing numerous opportunities to review and clarify the qualities and characteristics of each type.

Although there are advantages to immersing in one unit, this frequent shifting of writing experiences is authentic. In the real world, individuals write for different purposes, to different audiences, about different topics, and in different formats daily! Students should feel this variety within the writing curriculum.

2. Students gain second chances.

When students experience each type of writing only once a year, it's no surprise that they act like they've never done that style before. In reality, they likely haven't produced such a piece since last school year.

However, when a unit is spread across the year, teachers honor developmental readiness in their students. The cumulative approach of mini-units offers students multiple chances to hear, learn, absorb, and master a writing skill. Here's how it works.

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- **MINI-UNIT #1:** Teach two skills relevant to that type of writing. Assign students to write a short first-draft-only product.
- **MINI-UNIT #2:** Review the previously taught skills. Teach two more writing skills relevant to that type of writing. Assign students to write a new first draft on a different topic. Assess for all four skills.
- **MINI-UNIT #3:** Review the previously taught skills. Teach one more skill relevant to that type of writing. Assign students to write a new first draft on a different topic, assessing for all five skills.
- **ADDITIONAL MINI-UNITS:** Continue this process until all unit skills have been taught. [NOTE: It's likely that after the third or fourth mini-unit, most skills have been rolled out, and students would be ready to write and revise another new piece and take it to a final draft.]

Although students are learning new skills all year, those taught earlier are becoming easier. These second, third, and fourth products provide students more practice with a particular genre.

Notice that the products students create at the end of most mini-units are not final drafts— nor are they long first drafts. Most traditional writing units span multiple weeks because teachers assume each one must culminate with a polished final product. This requires a lot of class time spent on the various steps of the writing process (e.g., drafting, peer-revising, teacher conferring, peer-editing, publishing, etc.).

In contrast, as writing genres are revisited throughout the year, students' skills are developing and so is their automaticity. Therefore, they can crank out longer products in the same amount of time and with more independence.

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References

Calkins, L., Ehrenworth, M., Lehman, C. (2012). *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*. Heinemann, 2012.

"Each writing unit represents about five to six weeks of teaching, structured into three or four 'bends in the road.' Rather than tackling the entire journey all at once, it's easier to embark on this series of shorter, focused bends, pausing between each to regroup and prepare for the next."

Lucy Calkins, et. al.
Pathways to Common Core

Teachers often misunderstand Calkins' units of study. Within each book/unit of study, she says that a unit of study represents 6 weeks, but they should NOT be taught consecutively.

Teachers College Reading And Writing Project. "Research Base Underlying the Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop's Approach to Literacy Instruction." *The Reading & Writing Project - Research Base*, readingandwritingproject.org/about/research-base

"...students need long stretches of time, along with specific feedback aligned to next steps for them as writers, in order to progress."

Teacher's College/Reading & Writing Project

While the terminology may be different, the core principle is the same—Calkins recommends spiral teaching in writing. The empirical research by Lucy Calkins' team at The Teacher's College/Reading & Writing Project validates this proposal.

Give students time to try a type of writing, give them feedback and more instruction, and then give them another chance. This is cyclical. NO one gets good at doing something once.

Lapp, D., Fisher, D. (2010). *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*. Routledge.

"A...process for writing development is learning as a result of accumulated writing capital. The basic assumption underlying this tenet is that development as a writer serves as stimulus for further development."

Diane Lapp

This research demonstrates that providing multiple chances (through multiple mini-units) increases students' writing confidence and writer improvement.