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PROJECT SIGNATURE PAGE

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PROJECT TITLE: USING MENTOR TEXTS TO IMPROVE WRITING

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THE PROJECT HAS BEEN ACCEPTED BY THE PROJECT COMMITTEE IN
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Using Mentor Texts to Improve Writing

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Teachers and administrators are engaged in a close examination of the newly adopted Common Core State Standards. As educators begin to make the shift to implementing the Common Core State Standards, traditional ways of instruction are being altered and changed. The California State Standards developed in 1997 suggested the use of narrative and expository texts with an emphasis on the skills necessary for comprehending narrative. However, the Common Core State Standards (2012) explicitly requires the use of informational texts as part of curriculum beginning at the kindergarten level. In addition, the Common Core State Standards require students to be able to write in three different text types: narrative, opinion, and informational.

With the explicit need for incorporating informational texts and writing in different text types, teachers are held responsible for ensuring these aspects of the Common Core State Standards are seen in their classrooms. Beyond implementing the Common Core State Standards, there is a definite need for informational texts to be prevalent in elementary classrooms. Research shows that by reading informational texts students not only learn the content but the structure and literacy features involved in making informational texts successful (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Duke & Kays, 1998; Maloch, 2008). A student’s deep understanding of informational texts leads to students’ ability to produce informational writing themselves (Read, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

As teachers begin to make the shifts and adjustments necessary to implement the new Common Core State Standards, there is a lack of available resources to support the implementation of these new standards. In my particular district full implementation of
Common Core State Standards will begin in the 2014-2015 school year. In that same school year, students will be required to partake in the Common Core assessments. However, my district does not have the intention of adopting new curriculum until the 2019-2020 school year. It can be inferred that teachers must deeply understand the Common Core State Standards and be able to dissect their current instruction and curriculum to address the new set of standards and develop lessons where gaps in the current curriculum exist.

In preparation for full implementation, my district has rolled out the Common Core writing standards to be implemented this most recent school year, 2012-2013. Teachers are asked to make adjustments and change curriculum to implement the Common Core writing standards. My observation is that teachers are struggling to find curriculum that supports these standards, particularly with informational writing. As a result of these challenges, some teachers are choosing to continue their same curriculum and avoid filling the gaps in curriculum developed between what was required of the 1997 California State Standards and that of the new Common Core State Standards.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this curriculum is to provide research-based lessons that support mastery of the Common Core writing standards. Specifically, the curriculum intends to expose second grade students to a variety of quality informational texts and provide explicit instruction on how to read like a writer. The goal behind this curriculum is that students will begin to tune into interesting leads and be able to transfer their knowledge into their own informational writing.
Preview of Literature

Even though the Common Core State Standards are new to educators, the development of the strands of standards are well supported by research. In the same manner, the curriculum developed for this project is supported by research. The literature reviewed begins with the need for informational texts in the classroom. The research describes both an academic need for informational texts in all elementary grade levels as well as physical need for informational texts and instruction to be present in the elementary classrooms.

The literature reviewed continues by describing specific cases in which students displayed enjoyment and benefits from informational texts integrated in their classroom settings. One particular study suggests students are in turn motivated by informational texts and topics. It is through the explicit teaching of these texts that students are presented with the ability to produce their own informational writing.

The majority of the literature supports a need for informational texts in early elementary classrooms. The final section of the literature reviewed describes a need for a specific teaching strategy: mentor texts. As described in this section, there is little research that supports the use of mentor texts to support writing due to it being a newer concept in education. Mentor texts are used in the classroom as models for students to see examples of successful authors. Similar to this use of mentor texts, teacher modeling of the writing process is well supported by research as a successful teaching technique to support students in writing. This research is further discussed in the literature review.
Preview of Methodology

In order to develop research-based curriculum that meets the Common Core State Standards in using and writing informational texts, a literature review was conducted. The findings of the literature review determined a need for informational texts in the lower elementary classrooms. The examination of literature concluded that lower elementary students are capable of producing informational writing when explicitly taught and supported by the classroom teacher.

In addition, literature that suggested successful strategies for instructing informational writing was discovered. Students benefit from the use of teacher modeling and developing expert pieces as references for students. This transitions well to the use of mentor texts as a usable piece of literature to improve student writing.

As well as a review of the literature, several teacher support texts, professional development workshops and courses aided in uncovering mentor text techniques and titles to develop this curriculum.

Significance of Project

The development of this project’s lessons and supports were developed with the intention of implantation with my future second grade students. The literature reviewed suggests that with the explicit instruction of informational texts that students will develop a strong knowledge base about informational texts and will begin to produce informational writing independently. With the curriculum in this project, Common Core writing standards will be met and students will in turn be developing the skills needed to be successful throughout their academic careers.
The lessons and supports developed for this project will be shared with the first and second grade team at my school site. These teachers will be able to use the lessons verbatim, adjust the lessons to meet their classroom’s need, or be inspired to develop similar lessons in which they see benefit their student population. It is with these intentions that I will most likely present the curriculum at a whole school staff meeting.

Limitations of Project

The curriculum described for the purpose of this project is intended for a specific audience. The curriculum has been developed to meet the needs that are predominately seen in my school district, specifically at my site, and second grade. The needs that the curriculum intends to meet are derived from educational research and my own professional experiences. Where the goal is to develop curriculum that can be used by other teachers in other districts, the focus on meeting the needs of my particular location might limit its usefulness in different classrooms, school, and districts.

Definitions

Throughout the my research I use “non-narrative”, “expository”, “nonfiction”, and “informational” to describe a type of literature. While these terms can have slightly different connotations, they are used synonymously throughout my research. In addition, I refer to kindergarten, first, and second grade as primary or lower elementary grades. The curriculum is intended for second grade students, however the research supports all three grade levels.
Summary

At this pivotal time in education, educators and administrators are focusing their attention on the shift brought by the national adoption of the Common Core State Standards. My school district has spent the majority of allotted professional development time to educate and encourage teachers to implement the Common Core State Standards. During 2012-2013 school year, there was a focus on the effects on the changes necessitated by the Common Core writing standards.

In addition to the need created by the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, research and my personal observations have shown that there is both an academic and a physical need for informational texts and instruction in the primary grade classrooms. This project intends to provide research-based lessons and supports for primary teachers to develop students’ understanding of informational texts and build on their ability to produce informational writing.

The following section, Literature Review, will discuss existing research that supports the use of informational texts and writing in the lower elementary classrooms. This section concludes with studies of successful teaching strategies to develop lessons that will support students through reading and writing in the text type of information.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

With the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, teachers shift to integrating informational texts and writing in different text types. Even though the Common Core is enforcing these changes, research supports the importance of informational texts in the classroom. Literature reviewed in this section presents both an academic and a physical need for informational texts in the early elementary classrooms. The research also shows that students enjoy, benefit from, and in turn are motivated by the integration of expository texts in lower elementary grades.

In addition, exposure to and explicit teaching of nonfiction texts support students in producing their own informational writing. Specific to the curriculum in this project, the use of mentor texts has a key role in supporting students as writers, as well as consumers, of informational texts. As seen in its section below, there is not an abundance of research exploring the use of mentor texts; however similar teaching techniques, such as modeling, are supported as successful teaching strategies to support early readers and writers.

A Need for Informational Texts

Academic Need

Literacy instruction in the primary grades is dominated by fictional literature and narrative writing. However, as students enter third grade, there is significant shift in instruction from teaching students how to read to expecting students to read to learn other content. It is during this shift that students are required to read more informational texts and represent their learning in a non-narrative format. Thus, in order to better prepare
students for their future education, primary instruction must integrate informational texts. Caswell and Duke (1998) asserted, “More experience with non-narrative texts in the early grades may help mitigate the difficulties many students encounter with these texts later in schooling” (p. 108).

Duke and Kays (1998) examined 20 pre-literate kindergarteners to determine their knowledge of informational books and how exposure might lead to a deeper understanding of how information books work. Students’ responses in September and December were transcribed and then coded for analysis. The study showed that students in December used more informational features, text structures, and noun and verb constructions when pretending to read information books. Duke and Kays research concluded that children learn from frequent interaction with informational text and that students enjoy being read nonfiction books.

In an experimental and correlational study of the effects of authentic communicative function of reading and writing, Purcell-Gates et. al (2007) discovered that when second and third grade students were given multiple opportunities to engage in informational science texts their understanding and use of science informational texts improved. Students that were involved in authentic uses of these texts were able to comprehend and produce informational texts themselves.

In a similar study, Maloch (2008) examined how one second grade classroom interacted with informational texts. The study yielded three themes. The first was that students had multiple opportunities to interact with information texts. The second was that when students were engaged in information texts their experiences were supported
by the teacher with appropriate reading level texts. Finally, students’ learning was
scaffolded with an understanding of text features.

**Physical Need**

Even though research shows there is importance in incorporating nonfiction
literature, Duke (2000) found in her study of first grade classrooms that in fact there was
an insufficient amount of nonfiction literature physically available to the students. The
researcher visited 20 classrooms four times throughout the school year. She was looking
for the availability and access to nonfiction books in the classroom. The researcher
looked at books on the shelves, in classroom libraries, and written activities seen in the
classroom. The results found a scarcity of informational text found throughout
classrooms and in classroom library. In addition, Duke found that on average only 3.6
minutes a day were spent engaged in written activities centered around informational
texts.

In this research, three groups of students had introductory exposure to nonfiction
literature. The results show that students were academically engaged in these types of
books and began to develop a deeper understanding for its uses and purposes. As
students showed interest and ability to engage in nonfiction literature, an encompassing
curriculum would better prepare students for experiences later in their academic careers.
As Duke (2000) has shown, there is still a great need for embedding nonfiction into
primary classroom instruction and library shelves. It is difficult for teachers to provide
learning opportunities with nonfiction texts if they do not physically have those texts (or
electronic versions) within the classroom.
Motivating Readers

With the strong presence of fiction literature in the primary grades, one might assume that students naturally prefer fiction stories to nonfiction books. However, there are several studies that concluded students prefer expository books and are actually more motivated when engaged in nonfiction literature.

Beginning in third grade there seems to be more of a significant presence and need for informational texts and reading in the classroom. Nevertheless, Mohr (2003) discovered that when asking 190 first grade students their preferred read aloud, she found that an overwhelming amount of students chose nonfiction picture books. In addition, the author found no correlation between gender or Hispanic and non-Hispanic students’ choices in book preference. This study suggested that students want to be read nonfiction books more than the fiction stories that monopolize most instruction. Students show interest in and are engaged with informational books.

In another study, Caswell and Duke (1998) found that non-narrative texts can even be a motivating catalyst for struggling readers to be successful in both reading and writing. The authors validate that students need exposure to nonfiction texts in early grades to prepare them for their future educational experiences. However, through this study they sought out to show how two students were capable of overcoming their literacy struggles by using non-narrative texts as instructional reading material.

The authors used case study methodology to follow two students involved in a support center for struggling readers and writers. The first student, Peter, started attending the center while in first grade. They began to provide intervention using traditional fiction leveled texts. After a year, Peter made minimal growth. It was in the
second year of attending the center that Peter became engaged in non-narrative topics and texts. As a result his interest and motivation increased and consequently his ability to decode and comprehend texts improved. It was through his experience with expository books that not only improved Peter as a reader and writer but also increased his self-confidence.

The second student, an English language learner, Isaac, began at the center as a third grade student who could not read or write. Similar to Peter’s experience, Isaac was taught using primarily narrative texts and was not successful. Although after several successful non-narrative experiences, Isaac began to independently engage in non-narrative writing. Thereafter, Isaac became more and more successful with reading and writing non-narrative texts. He made improvements but also shifted his relationship with his own literacy development struggles.

The authors believed these students’ successes were due to the students becoming more interested in the content. In addition, these non-narrative texts built upon their prior knowledge and increased their knowledge base. Caswell and Duke also found that non-narrative text structure was better suited to the students’ home literacies.

Both Mohr and Caswell and Duke’s studies showed that not only should teachers create opportunities for exposure to nonfiction texts to improve students’ future academic experiences but also that students want to read and be read expository books and possibly these books can be used as a catalyst for struggling readers and writers.

**Producing Informational Texts**

Students in the primary grades benefit from being read and reading nonfiction literature (Caswell & Duke, 1998). The question then becomes whether it is appropriate
to ask students in lower elementary grades to compose informational writing themselves. This section will discuss research that suggests primary students are developmentally capable to begin to write informational texts.

The purpose of the Read’s study (2005) was to examine, describe, and interpret the ways first and second grade students interact with informational texts and how it relates to their writing. For the purpose of her study, Read used her own 24 first and second grade students. She both audiotaped students’ conversations as they worked together to produce informational writing and used their writing as a source of data. Prior to asking students to begin writing their own informational texts, Read exposed her class to informational texts and modeled informational writing.

Through analyzing the data collected, the author was surprised that students were actively engaged in the writing process as much as they were with writing conventions. The author found three themes in student conversation. The first was a concern with the content that the students felt they should include in their writing. Read found that many students realized on their own that they could generate more ideas if they read more. Secondly, students were concerned with the form of their writing. Read discovered that student pairs had discussions about syntax, spelling, conventions, and organization. The last theme was a reflection on the process. The author found that students were both rereading and revising their writing.

Through her study, Read found that her primary students were capable of producing informational texts. Her research showed that if students were exposed to informational texts in first and second grade and then asked to write informational texts they were capable of the task. Read concludes her study with, “Common instruction in
the primary grades may be underestimating the ability of these students to comprehend informational texts and to produce informational writing of their own” (p. 44).

Read presented the idea that lower elementary students are not only interested in the nonfiction content and picture books but are also capable of using their experiences with these books to develop and produce their own informational writing. This research suggested that while being scaffolded, students as young as first and second grade can be proficient at writing informational pieces.

**Using Informational Texts as Mentor Texts**

This particular curriculum calls for the use of “mentor texts” to introduce and support interesting leads and conclusions. The phrase “mentor texts” is relatively new to the teaching field. Dorfman and Cappelli (2009) defined mentor texts as “pieces of literature you and your students can relate to, fall in love with, and return to and reread for many different purposes.” (p. 2) There is a limited amount of research that incorporates mentor texts as a way of instruction and supporting students. Nevertheless, there is research that shows the importance of modeling and teaching students to read like a writer.

Several studies showed that merely exposure to nonfiction read alouds is not enough. Students need to be engaged in interactive nonfiction read alouds in order for students to transfer information learned into their own writing. The teacher must engage students in open-ended discussions about the information, text features, and organization (Wiseman, 2011). The teacher models how a good reader comprehends informational texts. These experiences active prior knowledge, make connections between portions of
the text, and establish an awareness of the author-reader relationship (Smolkin & Donovan, 2001).

In addition, research shows the value in teacher modeling in writing instruction. When a teacher uses modeling and thinking out loud to teach writing, he or she is invites students to see the purposeful decisions made in the process of writing. The focus is redirected from the product to the process of composing the writing (Ray, 2006).

Knudson (1989) performed a study to show the effects of instructional strategies on children’s informational writing. Students were exposed to several instructional strategies: a presentation of literary models, presentation of scales/questions/criteria to guide writing, a combination of both, and free writing. More than one hundred fourth, sixth, and eighth grade students were analyzed. Four treatment groups were randomly selected; one for each instructional strategy. Following the analysis of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, it was discovered that the most effective instructional strategy was exposure to literacy models.

Bradley and Donovan (2010) took this theory one step further and created an example of focused instruction using information book read alouds as models for second grade writers. In addition to using the expository book as a way of providing students with information, the teacher cued students to the “interesting ways authors decided to organize their information” (p. 250). The teacher essentially asked students to begin to read like a writer. The authors found that the informational books served as an important scaffold for student writing.

The research shows that students directly benefit from explicit teaching and interaction with informational texts. These texts can then be used as models of what
good writers do. This curriculum suggests that we take this research one step further and explicit teach students that they can use the ideas and organization of informational trade books to develop and strengthen their own writing.

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been much research showing a benefit for lower elementary grades to encompass nonfiction literature as part of their instruction. Students display enjoyment for reading and being read nonfiction and non-narrative texts have been successful in aiding struggling readers and writers. Yet, teachers continue to struggle to find an abundance of age appropriate nonfiction literature as well as nonfiction leveled texts suitable for early reading instruction. Research has shown that although it is beneficial to prepare students for their future education, classrooms still are lacking access to informational books and instruction in expository reading and writing.

In spite of this, when students are exposed to an abundance of quality nonfiction literature, they have shown the capability to transfer knowledge into their own writing. Research shows that when students are given the opportunity and are well supported they can begin to age appropriately produce informational texts independently. Modeling has been a successful teaching strategy in conjunction with early nonfiction exposure to scaffold students to be able to improve comprehension and produce their own writing (Read, 2005).

The existing research suggests that informational writing and informational texts have benefits in a second grade classroom especially as teachers move toward full implementation of the writing demands found in the Common Core. Students will most likely be engaged and if instructed well will be able to produce their own informational
writing. This curriculum is intended to expose students to quality nonfiction literature with authentic purpose. This curriculum will provide opportunities to explicitly instruct and discuss the strengths of particular books and how a writer might be able to use this information to benefit their writing.
Chapter Three: Methodology

As educators begin to implement the new Common Core State Standards, there is a lack of available resources and curriculum for teachers to research and use to support changes in teaching. In order to develop a curriculum that addresses the Common Core Writing Standards for informational writing and be supported by educational research a deeper look into informational texts and informational writing was necessary.

Methods

In order to develop a curriculum to address a major demand of the Common Core writing standards, research was conducted to develop an understanding of the need and ability to incorporate informational texts and writing in lower elementary classrooms. The review of the research supported the development of a curriculum to meet this need.

Researching the Need and Ability for Informational Texts and Writing

Before developing curriculum, research was conducted to establish a need for informational texts and writing in the primary grade levels. A Discovery Search was carried out to obtain empirical studies that researched the use of informational texts in kindergarten, first, and second grade classrooms. The Discovery Search was expanded to the impact of informational text on students of all age groups, specifically lower elementary. In addition, literature in support of students’ age appropriate ability to produce writing was found.

Researching Strategies to Develop Curriculum

In conjunction with the Discovery Searches to develop a need for informational texts and writing in the primary grades, a Discovery Search was conducted to uncover
strategies to implement successful writing instruction. Several empirical studies were found that supported modeling in reading and writing as a successful strategy to teaching students to write in the text type of information.

Through my classroom experience and professional development, the use of mentor texts was proving to be a successful strategy among professionals, colleagues, and professors. As part of professional development opportunities provided by my school district, I attended several events sponsored by the San Diego Writing Project. During these professional opportunities, I attended workshops that discussed the power of using mentor texts to support writers. These workshops introduced lessons and book titles that had been successful in other classrooms settings.

Several texts have also supported the development of this curriculum. *Nonfiction mentor texts: Teaching informational writing though children’s literature, K-8* by Lynne Dorfman and Rose Cappelli has served a resource to begin to gather ideas for lessons. Another text that has been a useful tool is Ruth Culham and Raymond Coutu’s *Using picture books to teach writing with the traits, K-2*. This particular resource has many children’s literature titles as well as suggested lessons.

In addition, attending California State University San Marcos literacy Masters program has provided many opportunities to deepen the importance of using mentor texts as a support of readers and writers. Specific to the curriculum developed for this project and in addition to the Orbis Pictus criteria for nonfiction children’s literature, Dr. Laurie Stowell’s PowerPoint and online lectures have served as criteria for selecting informational texts used for the curriculum developed for this project.
Chapter Four: Project

With the national adoption of the Common Core State Standards, teachers have begun implementation of the standards and begin to implement the standards in their classrooms. My district has required full implementation of the Common Core writing standards. In the 2012-2013 school year, teachers were asked to focus on developing new curriculum to meet the Common Core requirements. It was my observation that many teachers struggled with leaving behind what was taught since the 1997 California State Standards and embracing that of the requirements of the Common Core State Standards.

With these new requests, primary teachers seemed to struggle with developing curriculum that fit in the text type of information. Prior to the new adoption of the Common Core State Standards, fiction read alouds and narrative writing dominated the lower elementary grade levels (Caswell & Duke, 1998). Common Core demands students to actively engage in informational texts as well as produce informational writing as early as kindergarten. The curriculum developed for this project is designed to meet this particular gap, specifically by using mentor texts to support second grade students with developing interesting leads and introductions in their own informational writing.

The Common Core State Standards are formatted in strands that are developed throughout students’ academic careers. When analyzing the development of the informational writing standard from first grade to second grade, one major progression is that students are required to not just “name” a topic but “introduce” a topic (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). It is due this progression that this curriculum
focuses on developing students’ ability to create an interesting lead to introduce their topic when writing informational texts.

**Project Overview**

The curriculum is designed to develop a particular skill within a Common Core writing standard. The lessons in this unit focus on developing age appropriate interesting leads for informational writing. Through this unit, students will learn to use informational texts as mentor texts to read like a writer and develop their own interesting way of introducing a topic. Mentor texts and their leads with be displayed on an anchor chart for students to reference throughout the unit and the culminating assessment.

**Prior To Instruction**

Each district may require teachers to instruct the writing text types at different times throughout the school year. Due to the above mentioned struggles, informational writing in my district is taught in the third (final) trimester of the school year. Given that students are required to engage in informational writing after two prior trimesters of writing instruction certain routines, procedures, and expectations are already in place.

This curriculum would be best carried out in a writer’s workshop environment. A writer’s workshop block takes time to establish, and this unit assumes students are familiar with mini lessons then time to work independently on assigned writing as well as choice projects. Students comprehend that writing pieces are a process and take several days and steps to complete. It is implied that during independent writing time the teacher is supporting students and differentiating instruction to meet the range of needs in the student population.
Having writing instruction two trimesters prior to this unit, it is assumed that time has been spent on developing organization and conventions. This curriculum does not focus on these aspects of the writing process.

In addition, for this unit of study to be successful students need to have had continuous exposure to nonfiction texts throughout the school year. Students require countless interaction with informational texts before they can be expected to produce writing in this text type (Wiseman, 2011; Smolkin & Donovan, 2001). Nonfiction literature must be assessable for student use and exploration as well as used for explicit instruction on text features and gathering information. If students are comfortable reading and using information trade books, they will be more likely to be successful in using these texts to read like a writer.

**Using Mentor Texts to Develop Interesting Leads**

**Writing Piece #1: Deconstructing a Mentor Text**

**Introduction.** The first lesson uses the trade book *Ant* by Rebecca Stefoff. This informational text serves many purposes, however it is chosen for the introductory lesson because it is part of the Houghton Mifflin core language arts instruction for second grade in my school district. This particular title is helpful in that all students have access to a copy of the text in their anthology book and time is spent, as part of the reading curriculum, dissecting the story into main ideas and details. The following lesson assumes that students have read *Ant* as a whole group, small group, and individually. This lesson also assumes that time has been spent understanding main idea and detail both from a reader’s perspective and a writer’s.

**Mentor Text.** *Ant* by Rebecca Stefoff
**Objective.** Students will analyze a published author’s method of organizing information. Students will become comfortable using an informational graphic organizer to organize facts and include key writing features (main idea, details, lead/introduction, and conclusion).

**Procedures.** As an introduction, the teacher will review *Ant* and the language arts assignment associate with it. The teacher will review how Rebecca Stefoff used main idea and details to organize her thinking.

The teacher will continue the discussion about how this author came about writing this text. Guiding questions might include: Do you think Rebecca Stefoff knew all this information about ants before she started writing? If she wanted to find out more information how would she have done that? How did she decide what was important to include in her book?

After discussing Stefoff’s process of gathering information, the teacher will focus the discussion on how might the author have organized the information. Due to prior instruction students should come up with main idea and details. Then with access to the text and the language arts assignment students will be asked: What were Rebecca Stefoff’s main ideas?

At this time the teacher will introduce the informational graphic organizer that students will have access to for the duration of this unit (see Appendix A). As a whole group, the teacher will fill in the main ideas under the appropriate heading. The teacher should point out that a writer must organize their ideas before getting started and this might have been how Rebecca Stefoff organized her ideas and this is how we will organize ours.
Over the next couple writing mini lessons, students will continue to repeat this process for Stefoff’s details, lead/introduction, and conclusion. Discussion should continue that this is one way the author might have organized her ideas prior to completing *Ant*.

**Writing Piece #2: Spider Writing**

**Introduction.** It is important when introducing a new writing text type that students are scaffolded through the process. In this writing piece students will be guided through gathering information, organizing facts, and developing an introduction and conclusion. In this writing piece, students will be asked to remember how they “hooked” their reader in when in first grade and from other writing text types. A brief review of onomatopoeia as a reliable lead will be discussed in this writing piece. If needed, more instructional time and excellent mentor texts can be used to instruct these options as interesting leads.

**Objective.** Students will produce their first informational piece of writing in this unit. Students will learn to use mentor texts as a possible resource for getting ideas for interesting leads.

**Mentor Text.** *Ant* by Rebecca Stefoff, *Busy honeybees* by Justin Martin (A Scholastic Vocabulary Reader)

**Other Texts Used.** *Spiders* by Gail Gibbons, *Super Spiders* by Jason Blake (A Scholastic Science Vocabulary Reader)

**Procedures.** Students will be told that they will all be writing an informational piece on spiders. The teacher will ask students: What do you think a good writer should do first? Can we just use our schema about spiders to start writing? The teacher will
guide students to needing to do research. As a read aloud, the teacher will read *Spiders* by Gail Gibbons.

For the following mini lesson, students will be given a graphic organizer (see Appendix B) to gather facts. For the purpose of this writing piece the main ideas have been predetermined: appearance, habitat, and special talent. As a whole class students will recall information for Gibbons’ *Spiders* and add it to the appropriate main idea column. The teacher will need to explain that a writer cannot write about everything all in one book, so they have to pick only important main ideas and important details.

Over the next several mini lessons, students will read *Super Spiders*, an age appropriate nonfiction text, and continue to add to their list of spider facts. In order to not overwhelm students with information, these two texts and their schema should be sufficient to gather enough facts to write about spiders.

The following mini lesson, must be spent on deciding which of these facts are most important and must be included in their writing graphic organizer. As students sift through their facts (some will have more than others), they will add it to their writing graphic organizer. Students are expected to have two-four facts per main idea.

When students have completed the main ideas and supporting details of their spider writing they will have the lead/introduction section and conclusion section to be completed. The focus will then shift to developing an interesting lead and introduction. The teacher will spend some time discussing what has been successful ways to hook in their reader in first grade or in other text types. Students will most likely come up with onomatopoeia. If needed, the teacher can refer to *Busy honeybees*. Students can see how, Martin used onomatopoeia as his introduction: “Buzz! Buzz! What is that sound? IT
is a busy honeybee!” Onomatopoeia should then be added to an anchor chart titled “Interesting Leads”. The teacher and students will work together to develop examples of onomatopoeia that might be appropriate for their spider writing (should be listed on a separate anchor chart).

After reviewing a comfortable lead, the teacher will revisit *Ant* by Rebecca Stefoff. The teacher will ask students: How did she hook in her reader? Could we change her idea to work for spiders? “Spiders. They’re everywhere.” At this time it is crucial to introduce how trade books can used as mentor texts for writers to get ideas about how to develop their own writing. Students begin to understand the importance of changing the author’s words to make it their own. *Ant* should be added to the Mentor Text anchor chart as well as options for “Interesting Leads” anchor chart.

In order to remain focused on interesting leads students will be asked to write an opinion for their conclusion. This should be something students are comfortable with. Students will then need several days to work through the writing process independently and allot time for students to share their writing with their classmates.

**Writing Piece #3: Animal Reports**

**Introduction.** As students begin to become more comfortable with writing informational texts, a release of scaffolding will guide students toward independence. Because gathering information can be overwhelming for a second grader, for this writing piece, they will work in groups of two to three students to gather information on an animal of their choice.
Objectives. Students will work as partners to gather information. Students will be exposed to another possible mentor text used for an interesting lead. Students will compose a second informational piece of writing.

Mentor Texts. *Chameleons Are Cool* by Martin Jenkins

 Procedures. Before getting started, the teacher will ask students what is different about informational writing then narrative and opinion. Research. Students will be given the same graphic organizer, with the same main ideas (appearance, habitat, and special talent) to gather facts as they had for spider writing. Students will work in pairs or trios to gather facts. The teacher will help facilitate students choosing animals to write about. Depending on students’ animal choice, a Kids World Book Online article and a classroom library or school library book should give students access to facts about their animal. Rebecca Stefoff and Scholastic both have many age appropriate nonfiction animal books that are at a second grade reading level.

After several days of research and fact gathering, students must decide which of their facts in important to include in their writing. Students will transfer their facts as supporting details onto their writing graphic organizer under the appropriate main idea heading.

Students will add an opinion statement as their conclusion but leave their lead/introduction blank.

As a separate mini lesson, students will discuss if any of the interesting leads from their anchor chart would work for their animal. Students can share possible ideas using onomatopoeia or Stefoff’s example. The purpose of this discussion is for students to understand that not every lead works for their animal and they must choose the best one.
The teacher will guide students to the conclusion that a writer has to find a lead and introduction that fits their writing best.

The teacher will suggest that sometimes authors like to play with their introductions. The teacher will revisit the nonfiction text, *Chameleons Are Cool* by Martin Jenkins. (It is important that students have already read and discussed a mentor text prior to revisiting it for ideas. Students then are focused on reading like a writer rather than reading for enjoyment or learning (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2009).) The teacher will then model how he/she discovered Jenkins’ text as a mentor text. “I was reading this book and I loved how he introduced chameleons and I was wondering if I could do something like that for my animal.” As a whole group students and teacher will analyze the introduction and discuss how they might change it to fit their animal.

Over the next several mini lessons, the discussion will continue. The teacher will take the introduction step by step and model it to work for an animal no one chose. The students will work independently at each step developing their introduction for their animal. Where thinking creatively and outside of the box is difficult for some, students should be given an opportunity to share their ideas and help peers develop theirs. Below is an example of how this lesson might sound.

Jenkin’s texts says “Some lizards eat bananas – chameleons don’t.”

Alright boys and girls, the first thing Martin Jenkins did was think about what bigger family chameleons belong to and what makes chameleons so unique and cool to read about. For my animal, a dog, I might say, “Some mammals eat…” What bigger animal family or species does your animal belong to and write this sentence in your writer’s journal, “Some _________ eat”. Allow time to share and help one another.
Now we need to think what do most mammals eat but a dog would definitely not? The teacher should take students suggestions. “Some mammals eat ice cream – dogs don’t.” Now it is your turn. What do most animals in your bigger family eat but your animal would not and maybe would look silly eating. Allow time to share and help one another before moving onto the next sentence of Jenkins’ introduction.

After guiding students through an introduction similar to Jenkins’, students should be given the option to write whatever lead/introduction that fits their writing the best. *Chameleons Are Cool* should be added to the mentor text anchor chart as well as interesting leads. Students are then given several days to take their writing through the writing process with time for students to share their writing with their classmates.

**Writing Piece #4: Free Choice Animal**

**Introduction.** As scaffolds are slowly released, students will be mainly producing this writing piece independently. They will be responsible for gathering information, deciphering important facts to include in their writing graphic organizer, and most importantly will be given the opportunity to read like a writer and develop their own interesting lead based off a mentor text.

**Objectives.** Students will independently produce a third informational piece of writing. Students will get exposure to reading like a writer.

**Mentor Texts.** Books students have access to in the classroom library. An emphasis should be placed on a variety of Rebecca Stefoff books and titles by Scholastic Science Vocabulary Readers.

**Procedures.** Students will independently go through the steps an informational writer goes through to develop their writing. With teacher assistance, students will
choose another animal of interest. The teacher will help to supply students with age appropriate reading material to gather information. Students will have access to the graphic organizer used prior for gathering ideas.

The teacher will encourage students to choose only important main ideas (appearance, habitat, and special talent suggested but not required) and facts that support these main ideas. Students continue to use an opinion as their conclusion. This independent work time allows for teachers to differentiate instruction and support and challenge students at their specific skill ability.

For this writing piece the focus will be on introducing students (if they have not already been doing to) get comfortable with reading like a writer. The teacher has modeled several times what that looks like. Students will have access to the classroom library and other suggested titles to read through and see which author used an interesting lead that they like. This portion of the writing piece will take time. Students will need several days to look through titles independently or with partners. It is important to share finds with the group and add them to the mentor text anchor chart and “Interesting Leads” anchor chart. Students will then have access to many interesting leads and decide which one fits their writing piece the best.

Students then need time to take their writing through the writing process and share their final drafts with peers.

**Writing Piece #5: Introducing Biographies with Setting the Scene**

**Introduction.** As students begin to gain confidence and ease in writing informational texts about animals, it is important for students to know that informational writing is not just done with animals but with many other genres. As an easy transition,
students will be asked to write about a biography. Students will begin to understand that the writing process is the same whether they are writing about an animal or a person. Students will be exposed to mentor texts that introduce/hook their writing with setting the scene. Students will begin to understand how setting the scene is another effective way to introduce/lead their informational writing.

**Objectives.** Students will compose another informational piece of writing, this time as a biography. Students will use mentor texts that set the scene as a possible interesting lead for their own writing.

**Mentor Text.** *Diego* by Jonah Winter, *Babe Ruth and the baseball curse* by David Kelly

**Other Texts Used.** *Me...Jane* by Patrick McDonnell, *The chimpanzees I love: Saving their world and ours* by Jane Goodall; www.janegoodall.org

**Procedures.** The teacher will lead a discussion about informational texts not just being about animals. The teacher might ask: What other books are found in the nonfiction section of our/a library? Are these books considered informational? How do these authors get ready to write about their topic?

As students begin to see that informational writing is not just writing about animals, the teacher will introduce that their next piece of writing will be in about a person. When an author writes about people it is called a biography. Students need to understand that the steps to writing a biography are the same as writing about animals. The first step is gathering facts.

For the purpose of this writing piece a famous person will be chosen by the teacher and the main ideas are predetermined (person’s life and what they are well known
for). For this writing piece, students will gather informational about Jane Goodall. The teacher will engage students in reading Jane Goodall read alouds and watching clips from The Jane Goodall Institute (an online resource). As a whole group, the class will gather information about her life and Goodall’s interaction and impact on the chimps of the Gombe Forest.

The teacher will work with students to determine important facts from interesting details about Jane Goodall’s life and her impact on society. Students will chronologically add these facts the informational, biography writing graphic organizer (see Appendix C). Students will add their opinion as a conclusion.

The focus of this writing piece is then brought back to the lead/introduction. The teacher will redirect students’ attention to their anchor charts about mentor texts and interesting leads. The discussion will develop into can we use these leads for a biography. The teacher will take students’ possible leads using onomatopoeia, “Did you know” questions, and other applicable introductions/leads that have been used with their animal writing. Students might need the teacher to model how to modify the *Chameleons Are Cool* introduction to meet a biography.

After a mini lesson is spent on how to use the introductions and leads already discussed, the teacher will introduce another effective way of introducing a biography: setting the scene. Several biography texts will be displayed for students. The teacher will ask: If I want to get ideas for interesting leads where can look other than out chart? What if I read some of these biographies and see how they began their stories? The teacher will read from *Babe Ruth* and *Diego*. It is only important to read the introduction of these books. The teacher will then reread each introduction a second time and this
time ask students to tune into what these authors did that made their introductions/leads successful. Students will describe that the authors “jumped right into the story”, “told the reader when and what happened”, or “starts with a story”. The teacher will have to explain that the authors of these texts are setting their scene, so the reader is hooked into what exciting things happened to the person the biography is about.

As a follow up mini lesson, the teacher will reread and revisit *Babe Ruth* and *Diego Rivera* as successful examples of setting the scene. The teacher will ask students: How could we use this type of lead to set the scene for Jane Goodall. The teacher will take and record student suggestions. Students can then choose from a setting scene lead or one from the list or their own, emphasizing still that the author must choose the perfect lead for their piece of writing.

Students will need several days to complete the writing process with an allotted time for celebrations and sharing.

**Summary**

This unit of study began much earlier than the expectation for composing informational texts. Students need constant exposure and explicit teaching of nonfiction texts prior be asked to compose it (Wiseman, 2011; Smolkin & Donovan, 2001). When students are familiar with nonfiction literature and its text features students can be guided through developing their own informational writing.

The unit progresses with continually release of scaffolding. Students are expected to produce one piece as whole group with teacher support, then partner/small group support, and finally independently. Due to the unit’s placement in the school year’s curriculum, the emphasis can be on developing interesting leads and introductions.
Mentor texts are introduced as exemplary resources for improving students writing. Once students have developed the skills and understanding of how to read like a writer they are able to transfer this ability to improve other aspects of their writing.

No unit should be taught in isolation. Students will benefit from constant revisiting and modeling of the skill of reading like a writer. Students must be explicitly taught in other units how this ability can be transferred to other text types and writing techniques.
Chapter 5: Recommendations

As an educator, I recognize the importance of reflecting on one’s own planning, instruction, and meeting of students needs. In the 2012-2013 school year, when asked to analyze and develop curriculum for the Common Core Writing Standards, I was excited and intrigued to develop something new. My personal observations lead me to believe that not all teachers felt this way. Many members on my staff were reluctant to move away from the assignments that addressed the 1997 California State Standards and transition to a refreshed, changed curriculum that met the requirements of the nationally adopted Common Core State Standards.

It was through this observation that I realized that certain teachers are less willing to develop curriculum and analyze what changes might be best for children. In developing this curriculum my intentions were to develop materials and supports that teachers at my site, in my district, or other districts could use or modify as they transition to Common Core State Standards. The lessons are focused on informational writing because it was the text type I saw the most struggles, especially with lower elementary teachers. I also decided to develop my unit around the use of mentor texts. Mentor texts are an excellent teaching tool that can be manipulated for all areas of language arts instruction.

Through the development of my curriculum, I learned that it is difficult for me to remove myself and my teaching style from lesson development. The implications of my curriculum to be used at a more universal level and be accessible to other grade levels, other schools, and possibly other districts are impacted by these limitations. If these lessons cannot be used as they written, my hope is that teachers will be able to
manipulate these lessons to meet their own teaching styles and students’ needs. The lessons developed for this curriculum are research based and supported by quality literature that can be used at a variety of schools and even grade levels. If given the opportunity in the future to continue researching in this field, I would like to determine if this research-based curriculum develops stronger writers.

Lessons Learned

Through developing these lessons, I found it most difficult to remove my classroom setting and routines and make the curriculum accessible for other teachers. My end product reaches that goal for using mentor texts to improve student leads and introductions when writing informational texts however I struggled with removing the writing process and preconceived understandings that students would require to display mastery of improving their informational writing. Nevertheless, these lessons have been developed with a universal audience in mind. The lessons might need to be modified, however the core lesson and literature are easily adjusted to meet a variety of students.

Educational Implications

As with most curriculum, teachers need to be able to adapt suggested lessons to meet their teaching styles and students’ needs. The same is true for this curriculum. Due to my style of teaching writing and the concepts I believe to be important to be taught prior to this unit, this curriculum might need to be modified or adjusted to fit other teachers’ classroom settings. For example, the curriculum designed here relies on a writer’s workshop format, however the mini lessons can be adjusted for different classroom environments during writing.
If this curriculum serves as an inspiration for other teachers to develop similar writing curriculum using mentor texts, I recommend that they look at the books they already have in their classrooms. As we teach children to read like writers, we must do the same. Our classrooms are full of quality literature (hopefully) and when we begin to read these texts through a new lens we begin to see the potential they have to used as teaching tools and exemplary resources of what good writers do.

**Project Implementation Plans**

An immediate implementation would be use this curriculum with my incoming second grade students. As a first and second grade team at my sight, we meet regularly to discuss curriculum and successful teaching strategies. I will propose this curriculum as something to be considered when instructing informational writing. I believe insights gleaned from this curriculum being research based make a powerful case for the effectiveness and importance of informational texts and writing in the lower elementary classrooms.

Both at my teaching site and at the district level, there are opportunities to share my curriculum with other teachers. If given the opportunity I would like to scale down my curriculum and present it to a larger population of teachers to be used in their classroom or as inspiration for their own curriculum development.

**Future Research**

An element not discussed in my curriculum is assessment. Future research might look at the successes of these support lessons. Research can be conducted to determine if students are successful at using mentor texts to improve their leads and introductions. In
addition, it would be interesting to conclude if students are able of transfer their ability to read like a writer to other text types and aspects of writing.

**Conclusion**

With the national adoption of the Common Core State Standards, teachers are being asked to modify and in some cases change their instruction to meet the requirements presented by the Common Core State Standards. In preparation for full implementation in the 2014-2015 school year, my district rolled out the Common Core writing standards to be the focus of the 2012-2013 school year. District wide and site based professional development focused on supporting teachers through this transition. Even with these supports, many teachers were hesitant and unwilling to make the necessary changes. My personal observation was that teachers were comfortable with what they knew and without curriculum to support instruction they preferred to continue instruction as done before.

Lower elementary teachers seemed to struggle the most with incorporating informational texts and informational writing in their classrooms. The previous set of standards, the 1997 California State Standards, placed more value in developing narrative writing and comprehending fiction texts. The curriculum developed for this project is intended to support teachers in incorporating information texts in the classroom and develop students’ ability to compose informational writing. This curriculum emphasizes developing interesting leads with the use of mentor texts among 2nd grade students.

Through a review of literature, it was determined that there is an academic need for lower elementary students have exposure to nonfiction texts. Between second and third grade there is an educational shift from teaching students how to read to requiring
students to read in order to learn new concepts. With Common Core introducing students as early as kindergarten, students will be more prepared for this shift if they have been exposed and explicitly taught how use expository texts to support their thinking (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Duke & Kays, 1998; Purcell-Gates et. al, 2007). Even though literature supports the need for lower elementary students to have an abundant access to nonfiction texts, Duke (2000) found that there was lack of informational text and instruction in primary classrooms.

In addition to the academic and physical need for students to have exposure to nonfiction texts, students are interested in and motivated by expository books. When asking lower elementary students their read aloud preference there was an overwhelming amount of students who enjoy reading and being read informational trade books (Morh, 2003). Due the interest level and enjoyment, informational texts have shown to be possible catalysts for students’ reading development (Caswell & Duke, 1998).

The Common Core State Standards not only require students to engage in informational text but also be able to produce informational writing themselves. The literature reviewed determined that when students were actively engaged and explicitly taught how to read these texts, when asked to write in this text type they were more successful (Wiseman, 2011; Smolkin and Donovan, 2001). These studies confirmed that lower elementary students are capable of producing informational texts (Read, 2005).

Using mentor texts to support students learning is a new concept in education, thus not supported by research yet, however a similar teaching technique, teaching modeling is well supported my literature as a successful tool to support and teach writing (Knudson, 1989; Ray, 2006). It can inferred that if teaching modeling and using teacher
and student writing as exemplars, that information trade books can be used as mentor texts to support writing development.

In addition to the educational research to support this curriculum several teacher support texts, professional development workshops, and Masters course work aided in developing strategies to use mentor texts and cataloging titles of quality informational literature to use with students.

This curriculum serves a unit of study to use mentor texts to support students in developing interesting leads and introductions to their informational writing. The unit was specifically designed to scaffold students through writing in a new text type with the emphasis on building a repertoire of possible leads and introductions that would hook their reader into wanting to read more.

The unit begins with deconstructing a mentor text to understand their organization and the process an informational author goes through in creating a nonfiction text. The first writing piece is support heavily with teacher support. Students are led through gathering facts, deciphering important facts from interesting details, building a graphic organizer with an introduction/lead, and a conclusion. As scaffolds are released, the teacher’s focus is directed to helping students to learn how to read like a writer and use the introductions and leads of mentor texts to strengthen their own writing.

This unit was developed with a specific group of second grade students in mind, however the intent is for other teachers, other grade levels, and possibility other districts to use this curriculum to strengthen their writing instruction. The curriculum can be used as created, be modified, or serve as an inspiration for other teachers to develop curriculum that meets their students’ needs. My hope is that this research-based
curriculum can impact students to read like a write and transfer that knowledge throughout their academic careers.
References


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# Informational Writing

**Topic:** ________________

## Introduction:

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## Conclusion:
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Informational Writing

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Main Idea:

Conclusion: