



# Mastering the Essentials - Unit Overview

## About the Unit

*Mastering the Essentials* gives students and teachers the foundation they need to carry out a 21<sup>st</sup> century writing workshop that will show results over the school year. Teaching writing to young adolescents is enormously challenging because learning to write is not about one skill; it represents a “bundle,” encompassing everything from generating good ideas to editing the grammar of a final draft (Fletcher and Portalupi, 2001). Recognizing just how complex this type of instruction can be, this four week introductory unit aims to make start-up easy, fun and understandable to students, and highly manageable for teachers. But is it really necessary to take so much time to introduce the practices associated with the 21<sup>st</sup> century writing workshop? What can be gained?

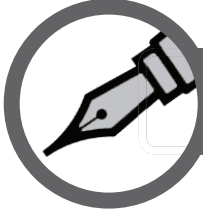
Linda Ellis and Jamie Marsh, the authors of *Getting Started: The Reading–Writing Workshop, Grades 4–8*, emphasize the importance of setting the stage when they state, “What happens in the beginning of the writing workshop sets the tone for the rest of the year. It’s critical to establish our expectations and organization, structure and commitment” (Heinemann, 2007, 51). *Mastering the Essentials* does just that. Students develop an understanding of the overall structure of the workshop and how they will take part in this environment that emphasizes *responsibility* (for choosing and fleshing out topics, working independently, exchanging writing with peers online), *active learning* (making effective use of in-class writer’s work time by writing in a sustained manner) and *professionalism* (producing complete pieces of writing and publishing for a real online audience). Students come to understand and develop essential skills while completing the first assignment, a written “snapshot” that briefly describes a real experience in detail. Students get their feet wet with several stimulating brainstorming approaches that ignite their imaginations, and engage in every step of the writing process while being supported by instruction that meets their individual needs as well as web-based activities increasingly relevant to their day-to-day lives. Ultimately, they produce work for sharing and celebrating.

For youngsters, this first project goes far beyond familiarizing them with the practices and guidelines that will be used all year. Students also have an initial enlightening and satisfying writing experience to jumpstart what is to follow.

## Unit Objectives

### Student writers will:

- Acquire an understanding of the expectations and practices associated with the writing work they will complete this year
- Effectively execute all the steps of the writing process supported by technology tools and activities: planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing their work
- Conceive and write short and detailed narratives (“snapshot”) based on personal experiences
- Apply fundamental structures (that allow them to place emphasis on the most important parts of a story) and craft strategies (descriptive language, vivid word choice) to enhance the personal narrative’s clarity of meaning, focus and appeal to readers
- Develop writing strategies that can be generalized across genre assignments.



# Writing Memoir - Unit Overview

## About the Genre

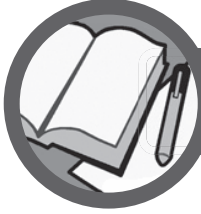
Memoirs capture moments in our lives. Memoirs are different from biographies; they don't span long stretches nor do they document life histories. Instead, memoirs describe in rich detail those small yet powerful instances when we discover important truths about ourselves and the world around us. While some are about milestones such as a wedding or a graduation, they can just as likely be about everyday experiences that mean something to their authors. Crafting this genre requires introspection and discipline. Writers must become editors, selecting what to leave in and what to eliminate in order to communicate a larger truth to their readers.

Bringing memoir into the language arts classroom provides students with the opportunity to take known material—their own experience—and reshape it into thoughtful pieces of writing. Our upper elementary and middle school youngsters have plenty to share. Like most early adolescents, they are likely self-interested. Teaching memoir allows them to describe recollections of their own choosing, while demanding the use of precise language and structure. Students learn narrative technique as well as planning, drafting and revision skills. Moreover, studying memoir helps them to reflect on and make sense of their own lives and to communicate meaning deliberately through their writing.

## Unit Objectives

### Student writers will:

- conceive and write a memoir that effectively describes a memorable experience and its special meaning for them
- develop narrative technique and corresponding approaches to planning, drafting and revising their writing
- apply a range of craft strategies and structures to enhance the memoir's focus, meaning and reader engagement
- acquire writing skills that can be generalized across genre assignments



# Response to Literature - Unit Overview

## About the Genre

In *Writing about Reading* (Heinemann, 2003), author Janet Angelillo explains, “It is powerful for [students] to realize that they don’t have to accept everything that is on the written page, that they have responsibility as thinkers to question and make meaning from their reading.” As educators, we want our students to become passionate readers who can dig beneath the surface elements of character and plot to think deeply about the big ideas and themes that touch all of us. This kind of behavior often leads youngsters to see the world differently. Their understanding of issues that face humanity deepens and their interest in writing about their newfound outlook expands. *Response to Literature* emphasizes this type of critical thinking.

When studying this genre in the classroom, students think about fiction from a more analytic and personal stance than they have in the past. They are challenged not only to identify big ideas and themes that have significance beyond the story they are reading, but also to support their thinking with evidence that convinces their audience to be of the same mind. This requirement prepares students to communicate their unique perspectives clearly and authoritatively.

*Response to Literature* also offers a companion *Test Prep Center* that contains a sequence of lessons that help prepare students for standardized ELA assessments that they will encounter throughout their academic lives. Through exercises in analyzing and reflecting upon reading, students improve their ability to write effective structured responses to prompts.

## Unit Objectives

### Student writers will:

- write responses to literature that communicate their understanding of a story’s meaning and make the connection between the theme, their personal experience and their perspective on the world.
- apply a variety of craft strategies and structures to make their responses to literature clear, cohesive and compelling to readers.
- effectively execute the steps of the writing process using technology – planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing their work.
- acquire writing strategies that can be generalized across the genres.



# Writing Editorials - Unit Overview

## About the Genre

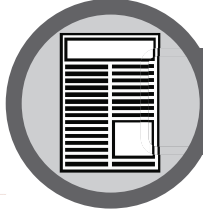
Author Heather Lattimer describes editorials as reflecting “the essence of our democratic society. Here is a form of writing that is entirely dedicated to civic discourse, changing minds, and effecting change.” (*Thinking Through Genre*, 2003, p.116) This writing genre can be particularly motivating to young adolescents as they wake up to their surroundings and the associated challenges and frustrations. As teachers, we can capitalize on our students’ emerging passions and their attraction to the controversial by providing them with ways to thoughtfully express themselves on the issues that matter.

When studying this genre in the classroom, upper elementary and middle schoolers have the opportunity to write persuasively in a more compelling way than they have in the past. First, they clearly express their opinions on controversial topics about which they feel passionate. They are challenged not only to support their opinions with arguments backed by evidence found through research, but also to consider an opposing point of view and counter the “other side’s” opinion. Students persuade their audience of the importance of their topic by issuing a call to action. In doing so, middle school editorial writers become empowered to create change in their communities.

## Unit Objectives

### Student writers will:

- conceive and write an editorial that effectively presents and supports a personal opinion on a controversial topic
- develop strategies and techniques for persuasive writing and corresponding approaches to planning, drafting and revising their writing using technology
- apply a variety of craft strategies and structures to bring out the editorial’s meaning and grab the attention of readers
- acquire writing strategies that can be generalized across genres.



# Writing Feature Articles - Unit Overview

## About the Genre

Author Heather Lattimer reminds us that “good nonfiction shouldn’t let readers forget. It should capture readers’ imagination and spark within them an intense desire to learn, not just about interesting people and places, but about ideas and perspectives.” (*Thinking Through Genre*, 2003, p.70) This is the great benefit of introducing students to feature article writing.

Feature articles dig in, going deeper than the superficial news bytes that bombard most of us on a daily basis. By reaching beyond the dry facts, features provide a fresh take on a real issue, challenge or problem. They have the potential to inspire readers’ compassion, understanding and enthusiasm for topics that may not previously have been on their radar.

When studying this genre in the classroom, students get the chance to generate non-fiction that is more exciting than what is typically assigned. Often, the non-fiction that students are required to write emphasizes facts rather than ideas. For too many young teens, this type of writing becomes an un motivating exercise in paraphrasing material from a text. Feature article writing, on the other hand, offers students a vehicle to communicate their unique perspectives on a particular issue existing in the world today. Students are encouraged to articulate ideas thoughtfully, develop their own voices and recognize that their voices have power, all of which are skills that contribute to a successful adulthood.

## Unit Objectives

### Student writers will:

- write a feature article that goes “in depth” by addressing a focused topic accompanied by a unique angle.
- apply a variety of craft strategies and structures to bring out the article’s meaning and grab the attention of readers.
- effectively execute several steps of the writing process using technology – drafting, revising, editing and publishing their work.
- acquire writing strategies that can be generalized across the genres.



# Writing Poetry - Unit Overview

## About the Genre

Teachers sometimes ask, “Why teach poetry?,” particularly at the middle school level when there are so many English Language Arts requirements to attain in order to prepare students for high school. There are several answers to that question.

Students are intrigued by poetry. It is the language of the songs that interest them and the spoken word they try to emulate. In fact, poetry is all around them. Addressing the relationships, self-awareness and change that is so fundamental to their being, poetry is often more familiar and relevant than other writing genres.

On the practical side, poetry is frequently shorter to write and read than prose. Many young teens, particularly those who struggle in school, have an immediate sense that this genre is approachable. Students can get through a poem and quickly feel a sense of accomplishment. Within that context, they learn how to generate ideas, draft, revise and prepare for publishing. Studying poetry creates an exceptional opportunity for literary analysis, language study and attention to detail so necessary for writers to be successful in any genre.

Most importantly, poetry provides a vehicle for making sense of this uncertain world. At a time in adolescents’ lives when they are exploring who they are, writing can be part of a natural process that starts from within and grows – from exposure to ideas written in the poems and lyrics of others, to expression of unique and personal thoughts and feelings.

## Unit Objectives

### Student writers will:

- write a collection of poems through which they express their unique thoughts and perspectives
- apply a variety of craft strategies and structures to bring out the meaning and emotion conveyed in their poems
- effectively execute several steps of the writing process using technology — drafting, revising, editing and publishing their work.
- acquire writing strategies that can be generalized across the genres.



# Writing Short Fiction - Unit Overview

## About the Genre

Middle school students and teachers often approach fiction writing with skepticism. For many students, reading and writing stories are simply chores: readings seem irrelevant and writing assignments overly prescribed. For too many teachers, creative writing isn't "real" in the same way that research reports and persuasive essays are. So why bother teaching our students to write short fiction? What can be gained?

When studying this genre in the classroom, students use their creative energy to transform events from their personal lives into a short "realistic" fictional piece: one that is uniquely their own yet worth reading by others. Student writers reflect on characters with whom they can identify and carefully consider how they might react to plausible challenges by asking "what if" – an intense and complex higher-order thinking exercise appropriate for youngsters just beginning to explore their relationships with others and this world. While they are free to imagine a storyline, at the same time students must harness their thinking to stay within the boundaries of "real life" if their stories are to have an internal logic that is compelling to readers. For youngsters, this is a tall order that requires them to contemplate what they know about themselves and others, about human interaction and about life in general. In the end, a work of fiction emerges that is both enlightening and satisfying. It takes writers (and readers) on an unforgettable journey while being based on believable thoughts, emotions and situations.

A teacher's job is not only to guide students in developing and crafting stories but also to help them understand and feel compassion for the people and challenges they are addressing (Lattimer, *Thinking through Genre*, p. 159). *Writing Short Fiction* provides a roadmap and resources that facilitate this exciting process.

## Unit Objectives

### Student writers will:

- write a realistic short story that contains a complex and memorable character, a compelling conflict and a coherent plot
- apply a range of appropriate craft strategies and structures to enhance the story's clarity of meaning, mood, level of detail and appeal to readers
- effectively execute the steps of the writing process using technology: planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing their work
- acquire writing strategies that can be generalized across genre assignments.