

Don't be surprised if your students want to connect the ELD passages to other parts of the text. This is a sign that they are engaged and understand the passages.

Grade 6

Unit 6A: Dahl & Narrative

Unit brief:

Think of the last time someone told you an engaging story. Maybe your daughter recounted a small triumph in a soccer game, or a friend groaned through a story about work craziness. Now, remember the dynamic the story created between the two of you. You moved closer as she began speaking; you probably laughed or smiled at certain points; perhaps you let her know you were getting it, saying things like, "Wow!" or, "You make it sound so funny!" As you responded, your storyteller pulled more from her story, filling in details, emphasizing a word, making her meaning clearer. Your responses made her observations sharper.

We want this unit to help you build a similar dynamic around writing and reading in your classroom. When that dynamic is in place, students develop and shape their ideas about what they are reading and thinking in the midst of a critically engaged classroom community where they can immediately understand the impact of those ideas. Genuine and regular exchanges between speakers and listeners, more than any technology, will drive student learning.

What you will find in this unit are lessons, routines, and tools that aim to sharpen your students' observations, enter them into an engaged conversation with you and their peers, and support you as you guide and shape that conversation. Your students will write almost daily for 12-15 minutes. Because of this, writing will not be a highly orchestrated, rare event, but a place for low-stakes experiments with new skills and interpretations.

Students learn the first skill, Focus, in the context of narrative writing. Narrative writing challenges students to zoom in close and write about the world they are observing in a way that makes an impact on an audience. Key routines like Sharing, over-the-shoulder conferences, Spotlight, and Revision Assignments are embedded in the lessons and designed so that you can make sure your students receive the consistent, targeted feedback that leads to progress. We envision these foundational skills and routines as a means of drawing your class in close to the table, eager to join the conversation, and excited when their ideas engage others.

At the end of these lessons, each student will be able to point to a piece of narrative writing with a confident gesture: For example, "Right here, I selected one key moment and figured out how to communicate what grabbed my attention." On this foundation, the second half of the unit invites students to apply their observational focus to some lively readings from Roald Dahl's *Boy: Tales of Childhood*. Students identify the details that strike them most strongly in Dahl's descriptions, then think about what grabs Dahl's attention and why. These lessons harness the routines and skills students built early on, so that the introduction of Dahl's text will feel like an exciting shift in the conversation rather than an abrupt change in topic. You will remain your students' key listener, pointing out where they make precise observations, and asking them to clarify what they notice about the experiences Dahl describes. As students move to later units, approaches to reading will become more challenging; this early sense of engagement will drive their ability to take on a more sophisticated level of analysis.

The digital platform itself should feel to you and your students like an open common room rather than an enclosed study cubicle; the technological tools are designed to facilitate your conversation with each other and with the text. The Spotlight app provides an opportunity to curate beautifully your own students' writing as models for the skills you are teaching. Gradebook tools allow you to quickly access your students' writing, comment, and give them the next little nudge they need, and immediately see what they do in response to your feedback. The eReader is integrated right into the lessons so that the book is always on the table, and each of your student's observations can be easily noted down and brought into the conversation. "The screen" is not something students are doing or talking about; rather, it is what allows you and your students to more effectively talk to each other about exciting ideas in the text, or experiment with new skills.

We encourage you to dig in, experiment, and see that you are at the heart of these lessons. Just like a good discussion, a classroom thrives when students are willing to take a risk because those around them are interested in what they have to say. We are honored to be a part of your conversation.

Sub-unit 1: Get Started

In these 10 lessons students write about their own experiences: observing and writing about specific details in their lives and using low-stakes writing practice to hone the skills of Focus and Showing in their writing.

Sub-unit 2: *Boy: Tales of Childhood* by Roald Dahl

Roald Dahl's 1984 memoir describes a childhood filled with fantastic contrasts of love and cruelty, mischief and suffering, humor and anguish. As one might expect from the author of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the 68-year-old Dahl writes about the years of his boyhood as if he could reach out and touch them. All the sensitivity, bravado, and drama of childhood are present, conveyed in the adult Dahl's compact, powerful prose, brimming with sensory detail. While the inner life of the child Dahl will be immediately recognizable to all people who were once children themselves, his particular circumstances may seem quite foreign. Born to Norwegian parents and attending boarding school in England, Dahl lived in a world now largely vanished. In some cases, he heartily wished it gone. While Dahl writes with palpable love about his mother and siblings, and the nurturance he cherishes from that distant time, he also recalls an educational system he is more than happy to have watched disappear forever. The book's most difficult passages concern the rigid, hierarchical environment of the English "public" school, where young students were subjected to the mental and physical cruelties of older students and teachers. These passages will elicit strong emotions in students, which they may or may not know how to express. It may be expected that the same material that makes one student cry will make another laugh; both students are reacting to the now unthinkable conditions once believed to "build character" in schoolboys. Both students are also reacting to Dahl's keen sense that children often find delight in what also terrifies.

In handling this sensitive material, keep students focused on how carefully Dahl presents it to elicit just such reactions. As they read closely, students will see that Dahl himself shares their feelings. He says outright near the book's close:

"By now I am sure you will be wondering why I lay so much emphasis upon school beatings in these pages. The answer is that I cannot help it. All through my school life I was appalled by the fact that masters and senior

boys were allowed literally to wound other boys, and sometimes quite severely. I couldn't get over it. I never have got over it."

At the same time, remind students that Dahl is showing us a complex portrait of childhood, with many aspects. The painful parts may draw more of their initial attention, but the funny parts, and the loving parts, are just as rich. The value of the book ultimately lies not in the facts of life Dahl lived, but in the vividness with which he brings them alive for the reader. The more distant from the students' own experiences Dahl's seem, the greater the enlargement of their imagination and empathy will be as they learn to suspend judgment and immerse themselves in a new time and place.

Unit 6B: Tom & Sherlock

Unit brief:

Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* novels and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories gave the world two of its most iconic characters. While Tom epitomizes small-town, antebellum life in the United States, and Holmes embodies the urbane, slightly sinister spirit of turn-of-the-century London, together they exemplify the kind of permanently vital characters that make 19th-century fiction the lasting pleasure it is. They are also excellent objects of study for sixth-grade readers learning to infer character traits from dialogue and actions rather than simple description.

Lessons will challenge and guide students through Twain's dialect and Doyle's British English. As students become more fluent in these unfamiliar writing styles, they will notice surprising similarities between Tom and Holmes: Both delight in breaking rules, rising to seemingly impossible challenges, and finding new ways to use their innate understanding of human psychology to get what they want. Students will notice that although Holmes' deductive reasoning is more sophisticated than Tom's seat-of-the-pants lying, Holmes' motivations and lack of self-reflection are not substantially different from Tom's.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, published in 1876, is the first of three novels in which Tom appears. Then, as now, it was immensely popular—the best-selling book Twain ever wrote. It is notable not only for Twain's creation of Tom himself, but also for introducing to the world Tom's disreputable friend, Huckleberry Finn. While Tom and Huck's slang will, at first, be foreign to students, their maneuverings through the world of adult rules and expectations will be intimately familiar. Tom, in particular, is poised at a developmental moment sixth-graders know well: just beginning to see an adult future for himself and still deeply immersed in the world of childhood fantasy.

Tom Sawyer is a lot of fun, but he is not an especially complex character, and the book itself is largely a sequence of anecdotes that do not build toward a narrative structure; thus, the unit chooses just five chapters for the students to read closely. The other chapters are assigned to students as challenges to read independently in order to prepare for the Quest (see more about the Quest in the overview for *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* sub-unit).

In Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Speckled Band" and "The Red-Headed League" (1892), students will meet Sherlock Holmes, an adult who never outgrew an essentially childish love of adventure and delight in showing

off. Sherlock Holmes' popularity with readers has not diminished since he first appeared, as countless TV and movie adaptations and continuing book sales, demonstrate. The most recent adaptation, BBC's *Sherlock*, brought Holmes and Watson into the world of present-day London and was a worldwide phenomenon when it debuted in 2010. Doyle himself found his readers' hunger for Holmes stories so burdensome that he finally killed Holmes off in the 1893 story, "The Final Problem." His fans' outrage was so great, however, that he was obliged to bring him back to life in the 1903 "The Adventure of the Empty House."

Sub-unit 1: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, published in 1876, is the first of three novels in which Tom appears. Then, as now, it was immensely popular—the best-selling book Twain ever wrote. It is notable not only for Twain's creation of Tom, but also for introducing the world to Tom's disreputable and, ultimately, much more moral friend, Huckleberry Finn. *Tom Sawyer* only scratches the surface of Huck's charm, but your students' experiences with Huck in this text should make them eager to meet him again in Twain's masterpiece, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a text they should read when they are more skillful.

Sub-unit 2: "The Speckled Band" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

In "The Speckled Band" (1892), students will meet Sherlock Holmes, an adult who never outgrew a childish love of adventure and delight in showing off. Sherlock Holmes's popularity with readers has not diminished since he first appeared, as countless TV and movie adaptations—and continuing book sales—demonstrate.

Sub-unit 3: "The Red-Headed League" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

"The Red-Headed League" (1892) seems to start the same way as "The Speckled Band," with a distressed client coming to tell a mysterious tale. But this story is even less straightforward—and will leave students wondering what else Sherlock Holmes and his author might be capable of. Make sure they know there are a lot more Sherlock Holmes stories in the Amplify Library.

Unit 6C: The Chocolate Collection

Unit Brief:

"For some reason or other, a Hershey bar would save my soul right now."
— The Dharma Bums by Jack Kerouac

The Aztecs used it as currency. Robert Falcon Scott took it to the Antarctic. The Nazis made it into a bomb designed to kill Churchill. The 3,700-year-long history of chocolate is full of twists and turns, making it a rich and rewarding research topic. In this unit, students explore primary documents and conduct independent research to better understand the strange and wonderful range of roles that chocolate has played in cultures around the world throughout its long history.

The ELD passages from The Chocolate Collection are the following:

Sub-unit 1: Fair Trade Chocolate

“Is It Fair to Eat Chocolate?” from *Skipping Stones* by Deborah Dunn

Sub-unit 2: Chocolate: If It Doesn’t Kill You, It May Make You Smarter

Letter from Lord Rothschild to Laurence Fish

“Eat More Chocolate, Win More Nobels?” by Karl Ritter and Marilynn Marchione of the Associated Press

Sub-unit 3: A Dream Come True: Smarter AND Healthier?

“Eat More Chocolate, Win More Nobels?” by Karl Ritter and Marilynn Marchione of the Associated Press

“Can Chocolate Be Good For My Health?” Answers from Katherine Zeratsky, R.D., L.D. of the Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research

Sub-unit 4: Chocolate: The Pros and Cons

“Dark Chocolate: A Bittersweet Pill to Take” by Mary Brophy Marcus of *USA Today*

Unit 6D: The Greeks**Unit Brief:**

Certain stories have a timeless quality. They explore questions and themes that help us understand the world around us and our role in it. In earlier units, students have learned to capture the power of storytelling in their own personal narratives; they’ve also learned to read both for knowledge (as they strive to outsmart Sherlock Holmes) and for empathy (as they explore various neurological conditions). This unit builds on those skills, asking students to move from considering the state of a single person—themselves or a character—to contemplating broader questions concerning the role people play in the world and the various communities they inhabit within it.

Drawing on the routines established in previous units, these lessons offer students a tour of Greek literature. The unit begins with Myth World, a Quest, that engages students in the complex world of the Olympian gods and familiarizes them with the primary characters of Greek mythology. In the Quest, students act as agents of their own experience, selecting their own path through Mount Olympus, the land, the sea, and the underworld. In each locale, students discover new characters; in many cases, they learn how the stories of one character intertwine with the stories of another. In this process, students learn that texts have contexts and that the content of a story depends to some extent on its teller.

This unit builds on these revelations in its remaining lessons, which focus on the rights and responsibilities of humans. They explore the Prometheus myth, considering whether or not humans deserved fire and Prometheus deserved to be punished for providing it. They read Odysseus’s description of meeting the Cyclops Polyphemus, considering how these two tricksters treat one another and identifying the character traits that define Odysseus. And they read a retelling of Ovid’s Arachne myth, focusing on the different ways that Greek mythology influenced writers from other traditions and the different manner in which this tale has been told by separate authors. Throughout these readings, students practice and continue to develop the close reading and writing routines they’ve been working on throughout the year.

This unit thus provides students an overview of how for centuries storytellers have used literature to grapple with some of life's great questions; it underscores the importance of text as a way for readers to learn about themselves and their communities. Throughout the unit, students will consider the choices authors make in presenting their stories; they will also construct their own retellings at times. We hope that students will immerse themselves in this world, becoming stronger readers, more persuasive and fluid writers, and increasingly aware of their own place in the world around them.

Of course, mythology is often marked by violence. While most students are able to contextualize these works along the same lines as fairy tales or superhero stories, you know your students best and should always preview the content, making adjustments as needed.

Please be aware that in “Arachne,” two characters compete in a weaving contest, and Arachne’s tapestry tells, obliquely, the story of the gods fathering children by mortal women, often in deceitful or unpleasant circumstances. The lesson focuses primarily on other elements of the passage, but if you feel this material is unsuitable for your students, please adjust accordingly.

Sub-unit 2: Prometheus

“Prometheus” is an excerpt from Bernard Evslin’s book *Heroes, Gods and Monsters of the Greek Myths* and introduces students to the Titan who defied Zeus to give humans fire. His provocative action, represented for centuries through art and literature, remains a favorite of many readers. This myth raises a number of engaging questions about justice, responsibility, and what it means to be human. It also introduces students to the issue they will tackle in the essay unit: whether or not humans are destroyed by their pride.

Sub-unit 3: Odysseus

A classic of western literature, Homer’s epic poem *The Odyssey* recounts the story of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, as he makes his decade-long journey home from the Trojan War. In this lesson, students will read Book 9 of the *Odyssey* and see Odysseus at his most cunning as he matches wits with the Cyclops Polyphemus.

This unit builds on the themes presented in “Prometheus,” challenging students to consider what traits characters exhibit, how individuals should treat one another, and what constitutes leadership. Make sure students know that several other books of the *Odyssey* are available for them to read on their own in the Amplify Library.

Sub-unit 4: Arachne

The final text of this unit, “Arachne,” encapsulates the longevity and influence of Greek mythology. The poem by Ted Hughes offers a retelling of Ovid’s original, which itself was a Roman story based on Minerva (or Athena, as she was known to Greeks). In this unit, students continue to confront the question of how humans should conduct themselves in the world; they also consider some of the many different layers that authors throughout the centuries have added to Greek myths.

Throughout the unit, students consider the traits that define Arachne and Minerva, both of whom struggle with wanting to be the best weaver. “Arachne” departs from “Prometheus” and the selection of the *Odyssey* in that it presents a contest between two females rather than two males. However, as with the previous texts, “Arachne” shows a contest between two central characters who disagree on the proper attitude or role of a human.

Unit 6E: Reading The Novel

Unit brief:

Tackling a large novel is a big task for middle grade readers. Some students struggle to carry various threads of information forward over so many pages; they end up losing the fabric of the novel by the end. Many are accustomed to paying attention only to plot points, but aren't sure how to develop an understanding of character or theme. Overall, students need to both prioritize particular moments *and* carry those moments forward for comparison so that students can recognize character and thematic development as they read later chapters.

These lessons target the character and development of M.C. Higgins in order to streamline what students focus on. More important, students will enact three basic reading moves again and again to practice both the small- and large-scale analysis involved in novel reading.

Sub-unit 1: *M.C. Higgins, the Great* by Virginia Hamilton

The novel *M.C. Higgins, the Great* follows M.C. Higgins over three days, as he considers how to deal with the threat to his Appalachian mountain home posed by strip mining while negotiating the pulls and pushes of family and friends. The plotline, however, may be secondary to the magical sense Virginia Hamilton breathes into these mountain people, their long-lived traditions, and the almost mythic landscape where they live.

Hamilton won the Newbery Medal for *M.C. Higgins* in 1975, and there is much in this novel to engage the middle grade reader. The main character M.C. Higgins is their age, yet he is depicted as a master of his wooded environment, climbing, hunting, and swimming with more skill than the adults around him. Those same adults are forever telling him what's important and how to live his life, but M.C. is learning to think very much for himself. His best friend, Ben, is not the friend his parents would have chosen for him, and Ben's family members are not the sort of people you meet every day. Finally, M.C., like many middle-graders, is not always the master of his new adolescent emotions and impulses.

At the same time, many of the features that make the novel so engaging also make it complex. M.C. is a dynamic character, full of inconsistencies and contradictory impulses. The Appalachian setting is at once described realistically and suffused with traditions and superstitions that seem magical at times. The narrative is told from M.C.'s point of view, and he can switch quickly from narrating the present, remembering the past, or envisioning the future. And the central conflict does not resolve itself easily or in a dramatic fashion.

All this can be challenging to many middle grade readers, who may be used to transparent themes, clear signs of character change and development, and a tidy resolution to the plot. Hamilton instead invites the reader to get inside the head of a complex boy who has titled himself "the Great." He strives to be responsible, wants to impress, and, sometimes, fails to accomplish either goal. He may be facing problems that he cannot solve neatly. Finally, he is learning that he may always disagree with the people he continues to love and rely on the most.

Allow this complexity a central place in your discussions. Let kids disagree with the character, let them find contradictions in what he says and thinks, and point out those moments where two students both use the text well *and* arrive at distinct interpretations. The opportunity of this book is that it is *not* an obvious answer; it is an opportunity for exploration and discussion.

Unit 6F: The Titanic Collection

Unit brief:

“I asked for ice, but this is ridiculous.”

—attributed to John Jacob Astor IV after the *Titanic* hit an iceberg.

Everything about the *Titanic* was enormous. The contents of the kitchen alone illustrate the scale: its pantries contained 40 tons of potatoes, 40,000 fresh eggs, and 36,000 apples, enough food to feed the approximately 2,220 people on board. When disaster struck, it was also on an epic scale. Of those 2,220 people, only 712 survived. Digging into the survivors’ statistics is revealing. You discover that 62 percent were First Class passengers while 25 percent were in Third Class, and 75 percent of the survivors were female. Two dogs, both First Class, also survived. The complex and nuanced story of the *Titanic* provides a compelling subject for students as they examine primary source documents and conduct independent research to uncover what really happened on that night in 1912.

Sub-unit 1: *A Night to Remember* by Walter Lord

In the ELD sub-unit, students focus on two passages from *A Night to Remember* that describe: the night the *Titanic* sank; who survived and who didn’t; and what the British and American governments learned from the disaster and the changes that took place as a result, such as making sure there is a lifeboat for every passenger.