

Grade 7

Unit 7A: Red Scarf Girl & Narrative

Unit brief:

Each of our students brings to the classroom a unique way of seeing things, a particular take on the world, a distinctive sense of what's worth paying attention to (and what's not). They're fascinated by some details, and they leave others out. They have ideas about what they see, they want to share what they've found, and they want to know what other people think of it. Our students bring this perspective to everything around them: their lives, their cultures, and the people and places that fill the books they read.

This unit taps into that energy by asking students to pay close attention to what they notice, to develop what they think about it as fully as they can, and to share their observations with the rest of the class. In the unit's early lessons, students begin this process by writing about their own experiences: noticing the specific details of a meal they ate, or a moment they learned something, or a place that made them feel uncomfortable. Through a series of targeted, low-stakes writing experiments, students learn to focus. That is, they choose one small part of their experience, zoom in on that particular detail, and spend time unpacking what they see and what they think about it. As they see how their classmates (and their teacher) respond to what they've written, students feel for themselves the power their writing develops when they hone this close attention.

After teaching students to explore the details of what they see and feel, the unit asks them to pay the same kind of close attention to its core text: *Red Scarf Girl*, Ji-li Jiang's memoir of growing up during China's Cultural Revolution. But before they start the book, students do some close "reading" of a curated set of propaganda posters like those that surrounded Ji-li during the time of her story. These powerful images serve two primary purposes in the unit:

- To give students a chance to discover for themselves what made Mao's propaganda so compelling

By seeing the kinds of images and messages that Ji-li encountered all around her, students gain a clearer sense of what drew Ji-li—and so many of the people around her—toward so deep a commitment to Mao and the Cultural Revolution.

- To develop students' ability to read closely—whether they're looking at images or words

Because they were designed to influence the people who saw them, the propaganda posters give students a vivid example of how deliberate art can be: how artists can include specific details in their work to create a particular impact on their audience. Interpreting images is often easier for students, too: middle school students typically enjoy looking closely at a poster or a painting, noticing the key details, considering their interconnections, and exploring their impact. As they practice analyzing these images, students develop the core skills they will use in their interpretive work with texts.

As you lead your students through this close reading practice, you may well find that noticing details is, in itself, a skill that students need to work on. It takes practice to identify the parts that a work of art is made of.

In fact, it takes practice to see that there are parts, to appreciate that the thing in front of you is made up of many details, each of which was chosen for a reason—to recognize that the building you’re looking at is an intricate construction built out of lintels, and cornices, and columns.

It also takes time for students to start trusting that the details that they notice are worth noticing. They need to learn that good reading isn’t about finding the “right” details, or the ones that somebody else thinks are important. They need to discover that the details that grab their attention—if they spend a long time looking closely at them—will lead to real insights about how an image works or why a character does what he or she does, or what a text means.

As you work with your students to develop these interpretive skills, you may find it helpful to use this phrase: “Show me what you’re thinking”. Often, as teachers, it’s hard for us to know what guidance to give our students when we want them to do a better job of analyzing the text before them. Sometimes, it feels like all we can say in class or write in the margins of their essay is “Go deeper”...even when we realize how hard it is for our students to do so. But “Show me what you’re thinking” is a direction that kids can follow. It’s doable. It creates a drama in their minds, complete with different characters playing off each other: There’s you, *the reader*, who needs to show me, *your audience*, what’s going on inside your head. And the only way you can do that is by pointing to the book and helping me follow how you got from *this* detail in the text to *what you think* about it.

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 use the skills of Focus and Showing in their writing.

Sub-unit 2: *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution* by Ji-li Jiang

At the center of the unit is Ji-li Jiang’s memoir of growing up in the midst of China’s Cultural Revolution. Set against a vast landscape of dramatic events, Ji-li’s story makes these society-shaking upheavals feel human-sized by tracing out their impact on the experience of an ordinary young woman. Middle school students connect to Ji-li in a range of ways; these are some of the most powerful:

1. The heroine’s difficult journey through a world gone wrong

Throughout her story, Ji-li is drawn in different directions by a range of conflicting forces: her desire to join the revolution and replace the corrupt old world with a pure new one; her empathy for the people who are damaged and destroyed by this cleansing; her longing to escape the shadow cast by her family’s history; and her love for her family. As Ji-li is pulled between these competing forces, her thoughts and feelings shift dramatically—and often veer from hope to anger to compassion to despair within the course of a single scene. These sharp, rapid changes offer students an excellent opportunity to practice some of the fundamental work of close reading:

- Identifying those moments that reveal shifts in Ji-li’s emotional state
- Unpacking the significance of these moments
- Tracking the change in her feelings and motivations over time
- Drawing together these elements into a coherent understanding of Ji-li’s character

2. A good student who is denied the chance to be a good student

Students often read Ji-li's memoir in a way that moves politics and history into the background and focuses instead on the simpler, smaller story of a young woman who has been playing by the rules all her life, and who discovers—just as she's about to start winning—that those rules have turned upside down.

Part of what makes Ji-li's account so powerful is how sharply she restricts the narrator's point of view to the things a 12-year-old would see and think and care about. And for this young narrator telling the story, the enormous upheaval caused by Mao's revolution matters less than the frustration that a child feels when the world turns suddenly, horribly unfair. One way to read this book is as the story of a young woman who slams into a world gone wrong—where all the things that used to get her the respect of her teachers, the affection of her parents, and status among her peers no longer get her what she deserves.

3. *Lord of the Flies*...the memoir

Ji-li describes a universe much like the dystopian fantasies so popular among our young adults: Something has happened to turn the world upside down, and the promise of a perfect world has warped into something cruel, ugly, and evil. The Cultural Revolution that Ji-li describes is a certain kind of adolescent fantasy made real, a place where young people are given unrestricted power over those adults who have been telling them what to do since they were born. In *Red Scarf Girl*, the old world is corrupt and in need of destruction; traditional customs, ideas, and hierarchies all must be eliminated; and children are given much of the responsibility for cleaning out this corruption and bringing forth the new world envisioned by Chairman Mao, their near-divine leader.

Throughout the unit, students move between direct work with the text of *Red Scarf Girl* and with a curated set of propaganda posters like those that surrounded Ji-li during the time of her story. These powerful images serve two primary purposes in the unit:

- To give students a chance to discover what made Mao's propaganda so compelling. By seeing firsthand the images and messages that Ji-li encountered all around her, students gain a clearer sense of what drew Ji-li—and so many of the people around her—toward Mao and his revolutionary project.
- To develop students' ability to read images closely. Because they were so deliberately designed to influence the people who saw them, the propaganda posters give students a vivid example of how artists can include specific details in their work to create a particular impact on their audience. Interpreting images is often easier for students, too: middle school students typically enjoy looking closely at a poster or a painting, noticing the key details, considering their interconnections, and exploring their impact. As they practice "close reading" images, students also develop the core skills they use in their interpretive work with texts.

Unit 7B: Character & Conflict

Unit brief:

Despite their many differences, Lorraine Hansberry's landmark play *A Raisin in the Sun* and Carson McCullers's short story "Sucker" are both grounded in a nuanced, deeply compassionate understanding of how people facing hardships can inflict harm they never intend on the people around them. Both the play and story provide students with rich opportunities to observe the growth and change of characters whose motivations are often hidden even from themselves.

Middle school students facing the storm of their own feelings and just beginning to realize what they might owe to others as well as to themselves, can come to see their struggles reflected in the trials of the Younger family, Pete, and Sucker. While Hansberry's play takes place in the context of important racial struggles, and McCullers's story seems almost sealed off from the world, the two narratives provide similar opportunities for analyzing characters' responses to conflict and appreciating the authors' development of ideas over the course of a piece of fiction.

The lessons' questions invite students to figure out what to make of the authors' rich language in just one moment in the text: What can we learn about Walter when he seems to be talking about scrambled eggs? What can we learn about Pete when he describes Sucker? As students describe the impact of the author's language and draw conclusions about the characters, they practice the skills of Focus and Use of Evidence that they learned in the introductory unit, now with new texts, thereby becoming more flexible and independent with these skills.

This unit then pushes students to use this close textual analysis to notice larger structural moves that the authors make across the narratives. For example, by tracing the characters' dreams at each point in the play, students can keep track of the significance of the quick plot movements and appreciate how Hansberry builds a seething image of Walter's frustrated dreams that climaxes in one heartbreaking outburst. The essay asks students to look at scenes before and after this climax, noticing Walter's and Mama's growth after this heartbreak.

By diagramming on the classroom wall McCullers seemingly simple three-part structure, students can carefully account for the extraordinary changes that have taken place in the story's very ordinary setting. Attention to structure can sometimes pull students away from careful reading and lead to overly formulaic conclusions. You'll find many moments in the lessons that ensure that students' insights remain grounded in the complex language of these texts.

You may choose to insert the Quest (see the following description) before the lessons about "Sucker" in order to maintain students' focus on the content of *A Raisin in the Sun* and for a change of pace in lesson structure. Or it may make more sense for your students to maintain a focus on the skills that they have been working on, using the same structures and routines, by continuing directly on to the "Sucker" lessons and saving the Quest for the very end of the unit. In any case, notice to what extent students are able to use the skills of Focus and Use of Evidence in the various contexts. Those students who can truly apply the skills independently no matter the routine are the ones who you can be most sure will demonstrate those skills in a testing environment.

Quest: Black, White and Blues in Chicago

After students have finished reading *A Raisin in the Sun* and have written the essay, you can change the pace and offer them another context in which to apply their reading and writing skills by guiding them through the Black, White and Blues in Chicago Quest. It is an immersive, five-day activity designed to help young students understand the context in which *A Raisin in the Sun* was written and performed. Playing through the eyes of a member of the Younger family, each student will be able to step outside of Mama's apartment and onto the streets of South Side Chicago, lovingly reconstructed with real photographs of mid-century Chicago into an interactive 3D space.

Students will see for themselves just what Travis, Walter, Ruth, Beneatha, and Mama saw when they walked offstage and into their neighborhood. As part of their exploration, students will be exposed to the words and thoughts of many of the Civil Rights Movement's greatest thinkers, including James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Lorraine Hansberry herself, as each attempts to explain the complex realities of racism and segregation in America. Students will leave the Quest equipped with not just the historical context of the play, but also the emotional context, and will have forged a personal connection with the people Hansberry was writing for and about.

Access the Quest to get more information from the Teacher's Guide about exactly how to plan for the Quest. A Quest lesson day can be done during a regular lesson period, but you may want to consider scheduling the Quest as an internal field trip when you can join together with another class or extend the time period of one or more of the experiences. Quests can break down walls within the school, removing students from their daily routine by creating new physical and/or figurative spaces; here students can make contact with a known text in new and rewarding ways. Amplify encourages teachers and administrators to think big when it comes to the implementation of Quests—and to think of them as unique experiences that can unite a school under a single umbrella of learning. If you want to try to schedule the Quest as an internal field trip, the timing of the Quest can be flexible; it will be relevant to the students for many weeks after they have read the play.

Sub-unit 1: *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry

A Raisin in the Sun debuted in 1959. The mere fact that a play by a black woman, about an almost entirely black cast of characters, debuted on Broadway at all was newsworthy and controversial. The play eventually met with critical and popular success, earning a host of awards. More important, however, it ignited a debate that in many ways continues, about whether a story about a black family can be universally representative of the American experience.

While the artistry of the Youngers' vivid family dynamics and personal struggles is entirely Hansberry's own, her life history gave her excellent material to draw upon in portraying the family's encounter with the sinister Mr. Lindner. During Hansberry's childhood her family lived in an all-white Chicago neighborhood where the hostility of their neighbors, and the threat of physical violence, were ever present. Hansberry's father was the plaintiff in *Hansberry v. Lee*, 311 U.S. 32 (1940), a case that challenged the neighborhood's legal exclusion of black homeowners. While Hansberry's father lost the case, the house they lived in is now a historical landmark.

Sub-unit 2: “Sucker” by Carson McCullers

Carson McCullers wrote a number of critically acclaimed novels, the best known of which are *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). Her great theme was love and its attendant suffering. As “Sucker” demonstrates, her ability to see and represent love’s many disguises and transformations was profound. When one considers that she was only 17 years old when she wrote “Sucker,” her insight begins to look uncanny.

Although “Sucker” describes events and interactions that might happen in any adolescent life, McCullers makes the reader feel the full force of their impact on the people going through them. McCullers knows that a single night, a single act of cruelty, can be enough to subtly redirect the path a life takes thereafter, and she is unsparing in imagining the consequences of such an act. She is also, however, remarkably empathetic toward all of her characters. Pete may act thoughtlessly, and even maliciously, but McCullers shows us that he, too, is subject to the casual brutality of other people’s changing feelings.

Unit 7C: Brain Science**Unit brief:**

This unit challenges students to build their understanding of brain science by reading three non-fiction texts, building toward a point at which they can compare and contrast the sophisticated case studies from Oliver Sacks’s *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.

1. Students begin their study with *Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story About Brain Science*, a text by John Fleischman. Like *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, this text works through a case study to engage the reader in the study of the brain. In both books, students meet the doctors, patients, and research scientists—a rich cast of characters—who helped to create this field of brain science.
2. After reading *Phineas Gage*, and before they get to the more difficult *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, students read the article “Demystifying the Adolescent Brain” by Laurence Steinberg, discovering how their own brain develops and how it impacts their behavior.
3. Their introduction to *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* comes through an immersive Quest, described in greater detail below. Finally, after students have experienced the five case studies in the Quest, they tackle the challenge of comparing and contrasting various cases of brain injuries described in Sacks’s book with that of *Phineas Gage* and another case they’ve learned about in a video.

The topic: brain science

The primary purpose of this unit, of course, is for students to become practiced at reading and writing about informational non-fiction texts and to learn how to build knowledge from those texts around one topic.

But it’s not an accident that the unit focuses on brain science. Aside from simply being a fascinating topic, brain science is a particularly productive topic for young students to study because of what it teaches them about their power over their own learning. In the article “Demystifying the Adolescent Brain,” students read about how the brain develops in response to how it is actually used. Practicing a particular skill over and over

again causes more efficient and effective neural pathways to develop in the brain. When a student understands how practice has a direct impact on his or her brain development, it's much easier to motivate him or her to do the hard work necessary to develop reading and writing skills at the highest levels. And Amplify ELA offers students opportunities to extend their reading and writing work beyond the classroom in the World of Lexica™ and in the Amplify Library. Students can find hundreds of books and curated research collections in this virtual library.

The article that students read on their brain development, “Demystifying the Adolescent Brain,” is a challenging science article that students will tackle toward the end of the unit, after they've practiced reading informational writing and gained some background information about the brain from a more accessible text: *Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story About Brain Science* by John Fleischman.

Transition from literature to informational text

The early lessons about the *Phineas Gage* text make an easy transition from the literature units and do not address the science at all. Instead, they focus students on Fleischman's storytelling techniques, helping students make a smooth transition from fictional narratives. Students notice that Fleischman is no Mark Twain or Lorraine Hansberry; his style, while very effective, is much less artful. And, in fact, his language is often so melodramatic that it can even distract readers entirely from key scientific information. Noticing these potential distractions helps students refine their ability to read carefully for accurate information, and track and correct their own misunderstandings.

Misunderstandings

Identifying and learning from misunderstandings is a major theme of this unit and a particular focus of the students' work with this first text, *Phineas Gage*. The text itself teaches brain science through stories about 19th-century scientists' reactions to one particular medical case in which a man survived an iron rod going through his head. The reader has to distinguish between what we know about the brain today and what the scientists thought was true at various points in history.

In order to help students fully appreciate the impact of the scientists' misunderstandings, and in order to encourage students to approach their own misunderstandings with the curiosity and energy of a scientist, the lessons return repeatedly to this theme in two ways:

1. Students track their own and the scientists' misunderstandings in a Misunderstanding Notebook app. It provides a structure for spotting, describing, and learning from misunderstandings.
2. Many lessons use a technique borrowed from Eric Mazur, a physics professor at Harvard University. The technique helps students work with partners to find the source of their own misunderstandings in the text.

For your reference, below is the sequence of steps that the lessons in the Brain Science unit use to implement the Mazur technique. Find out more about Eric Mazur's work online at: <http://harvardmagazine.com/2012/03/twilight-of-the-lecture>.

1. Independently, students answer a factual question based on the text. (Featured in the lesson “Where did the blasting process go wrong?”)
2. The teacher projects students’ answers so that students can see the range of answers in the class. The teacher does not give students the correct answer yet.
3. Students pair with students who have different answers, reconsider their answers while looking back at the text, and come to a common answer with their partners.
4. The teacher shows students the range of answers again and this time gives students the correct answer.
5. The teacher leads a discussion about where students found the correct answer in the text and which parts of the text led to incorrect answers and misunderstandings.

Writing

By reading and rereading these challenging texts, students deepen their understanding of these new ideas and concepts. But, to really develop and demonstrate the deepest level of understanding of these non-fiction texts, students need to practice writing that describes basic facts, explains concepts, and convinces the reader of an opinion.

Much of the early writing that students will do in the unit will happen in the Misunderstanding Notebook in order to build up students’ ability to write very informally about non-fiction text while making careful distinctions between closely linked concepts. Don’t let this emphasis on factual precision in the students’ writing cramp their style or limit their productivity. In fact, students should feel comfortable in their notebooks and in their responses to Writing Prompts expressing the same thing in several ways—maybe even leaving it up to their readers to help them choose the one that’s the most clear.

In addition to building their capacity to explain how things work (and don’t work), students will also have extensive practice making comparisons. In the early part of the unit, students will make comparisons between what the scientists used to think and what we know now is actually true about the brain. Then, students will compare 19th-century theories about the brain. When they study the adolescent brain, the Writing Prompts challenge students to distinguish between that unique period of development and the ones before and after it. And finally, students are asked to compare and contrast case studies in the Writing Prompts for *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and for the Writing Prompt in the essay. Students should become increasingly proficient at using these comparisons to delineate differences and gain insight into similarities.

Quest: Perception Academy

The Perception Academy Quest takes students through a series of linked activities that focus on brain disorders and how they affect what we perceive and how we respond to the world around us. Students move through the periods of a school day as though they have one of the perception disorders detailed in Oliver Sacks's book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. Students master excerpts from this difficult non-fiction text, building on the work they've done during the Brain Science unit so far.

The Quest is made up of six parts—each one representing a section of the school day—and a series of three interludes that occur between parts.

The Quest is structured like a good thriller: First, students recognize that something is amiss, but they don't understand what it is; next they read Oliver Sacks's excerpts to learn about and explore what is "happening" to them; and finally they widen and deepen their understanding of brain disorders by working collaboratively.

Access the Quest to get more information from the Instructional Guide about exactly how to plan for the Quest. A Quest lesson day can be done during a regular lesson period, but you may want to consider scheduling

the Quest as an internal field trip when you can join with another class or extend the time period of one or more of the experiences. Quests can break down walls within the school, removing students from their daily routine by creating new physical and/or figurative spaces wherein students make contact with a known text in new and rewarding ways. Amplify encourages teachers and administrators to think big when it comes to the implementation of Quests—and to think of them as unique experiences that can unite a school under a single umbrella of learning.

**Sub-unit 1: *Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story about Brain Science*
by John Fleischman**

John Fleischman wrote a book that no middle school student can stop reading. No one can be sure what it is about *Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story About Brain Science* that keeps the young reader going: Could it be the gorgeous and fascinating images? The gross anatomical details? The amazing story of the man, Phineas Gage, who survived his terrible accident? The determination and dedication of the 19th-century doctors? The scientific insight where you least expect it?

In any case, one doesn't need to know exactly why students love the book to appreciate that this is the non-fiction text that every teacher has been looking for. But beware: Left on their own, students will devour this book, but they will not nail the science. In fact, many of the narrative elements that are most fun and engaging in the book actually distract students from understanding the scientific concepts with precision. This complex mix of narrative and science is an opportunity for students to learn how to be especially careful and purposeful readers. The structure of the Amplify ELA lessons makes sure that students take care to practice integrating careful reading habits into the fun experience of a great read.

Sub-unit 2: “Demystifying the Adolescent Brain” by Laurence Steinberg

“Demystifying the Adolescent Brain” by Laurence Steinberg is a very challenging informational text. But even though it is difficult, students are up to the task because it is about *them*—they have some at-the-ready background knowledge that makes the article more readable than others at this level would be.

The article effectively explains, in just a few pages, the ways that scientists study the brain today, making for a nice contrast with the descriptions of the 19th-century science in *Phineas Gage*. And without too much scientific complexity, Steinberg captures some of the most significant processes in adolescent brain development, and explains why teenagers’ behavior seems so uneven and unpredictable but actually makes perfect sense.

These are the most important terms that students should pay attention to:

- Synapse
- Synaptic pruning
- Myelination
- Frontal cortex
- Dopamine
- Neurotransmitter

And, as described in the unit overview, this article is particularly powerful for adolescents because it helps them understand not just the impact of their brain on their behavior, but also the impact of their behavior on their brain. Most important, students should note that synaptic pruning and myelination occur in response to what a person does—and that the more a person practices a particular skill, the more pruning and myelination occur in the brain, which in turn makes the brain more efficient and improves performance of the skill. Neurologists believe that this impact of practice on brain development is true throughout life, but particularly true during key developmental periods like adolescence.

Students will use this text to answer the Essay Prompt: “Compare Phineas’ behavior and brain to that of an adolescent.” More sophisticated students will note that one major difference between Phineas’s brain and that of an adolescent is that Phineas’s frontal cortex was permanently damaged, while the adolescent’s is simply not completely developed.

Unit 7D: Poetry & Poe**Unit brief:**

Some would say the writers in this unit—D. H. Lawrence, Federico García Lorca, Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe—are too difficult for middle school. Their language is poetic, literary, and complex. They use vocabulary and syntax from earlier eras.

Amplify was careful, however, to choose texts by these authors that—once you start making sense of them—are quite visceral and concrete.

We particularly sought out texts that are highly visual in the following two senses:

1. They describe vivid, visual images that students will be able to “see.”
2. “Seeing” the imagery will open the door to a more comprehensive understanding of the text.

The practice we will keep returning to in this unit is a set of visualization techniques that we call “reading like a movie director.” When movie directors make a movie out of text, they have to read it carefully. They can’t be passive readers, because they are going to have to *make* something out of their reading—something that captures the essence and key details of the original work, but also makes it new. Since moviemaking is an art form that includes images and sound, moviemakers have to pay particular attention to the images the writer is evoking and the sounds the text describes. It also brings matters of character, setting, and perspective to the fore—where will it be filmed? From whose perspective will this scene be seen? How will we convey the characters through their actions rather than through textual descriptions?

As the unit progresses, students will practice making mental movies, analyzing different perspectives from which events might be seen, conceiving of the sets they would create, thinking about how they would cast key characters, and thinking about the overall mood they would need to evoke.

To support this work, we have commissioned an Academy Award-winning animation studio, Moonbot Studios, to make two animated versions of Poe pieces. We will invite students to see ways in which the animations do or don’t follow the original. (A key insight students might have is that sometimes the animations are more faithful to the essence of the original when they creatively depart from it, rather than by rendering every detail literally.)

Here are a few steps we will go through repeatedly in this unit:

Step 1: Forming a mental image. We’ll use a D. H. Lawrence, a Federico García Lorca, and an Emily Dickinson poem to teach students this approach to close reading: if you don’t understand the whole, make a mental image of the things you do understand. Then flesh out the details of that visual image, and it may start to reveal the meaning of the whole. We encourage you to have students make word pictures, sketch on paper, and use any drawing tools available to try to capture what they “see” in the text.

Step 2: Making storyboards. Beginning with their reading of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” students begin to make their mental images from Step 1 concrete in exactly the way movie directors do—with storyboards. We have designed the Tell-Tale Art app to make it easy for students to create storyboards, and for the teacher to see what is—and isn’t—conveyed in each student’s rendering. Later, students will study the storyboarding process of the professional filmmakers who created the two animations in this unit.

Step 3: Directing. Students begin conceiving of their own approach to perspective, characters, settings, sounds/soundtracks, and mood. These are all things that movie directors must address, and they are all great close reading practices.

Step 4: Comparing movies and written stories. Your students will have access to two thoughtful animated adaptations of the Poe texts they study in this unit: “The Raven” and “The Cask of Amontillado.” They watch these movies only after they have created their own mental visualizations. And then, rather than simply watching what they have read, they will carefully analyze the choices made by the filmmakers and critique whether they would have made the same or different choices.

One part of “reading like a movie director” is learning to pay attention to the things that directors attend to. Another part is that directors read in order to “make something” of the text. In this spirit, we have an annual video contest for the best musical or dramatic interpretation of “The Raven,” but you should feel free to invent your own activities for what students might create during this unit.

Don’t hesitate to tell students that the readings in this unit are difficult, that they might make little sense at first, and that they may not make sense even after several readings. But assure them that you and the class will stay with each text until it makes sense to everyone. It will be important for students to struggle with the difficulty, and to see the kind of hard work that making sense of a text requires. These texts will reward the effort—the sense that emerges will be vivid and precise even if it started out blurry and incomplete. And the confidence that comes when students learn that they can make sense of complex 19th-century texts is a powerful force for their future as readers.

Quest: Who Killed Edgar Allan Poe?

Just when students are settling into reading Poe with confidence, you will dim the lights and show them a movie in which Poe tells the world that he has been murdered—by one of his characters, critics, or fellow authors. The Who Killed Edgar Allan Poe? Quest is always a favorite with students. It adds a bit of “reading like a detective” to this “read like a movie director” unit. Students and teachers have the opportunity to play around in his brilliantly moody scenarios with an Amplify Quest. They also have the opportunity to read additional Poe texts: “The Masque of the Red Death,” “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” and “Annabel Lee.”

Quests are opportunities for students to apply the reading and writing skills they have just developed to activities that are more integrated and collaborative. Using these reading and writing skills in new contexts to solve problems will help students internalize the skills and expand their ability to apply them under a variety of conditions.

Quests are broken up into 45- to-60-minute lessons, but can be very beneficial to implement as continuous experiences of several hours—if you are so inclined and able to schedule a special half-day “internal field trip” for your students. While it makes sense to implement the Quest immediately after completing the lessons on “The Cask of Amontillado,” it is still worthwhile to do this Quest with students at a later time. If done as separate lessons, this Quest will take seven days to complete. Find among your apps the Quest Who Killed Edgar Allan Poe?, which includes an Instructional Guide and all student materials. Reading this in advance will allow you to prepare for the Quest.

You’ll know things are really working if you find students reading Poe stories that you haven’t assigned because it helps them solve the mystery. Or is it because they are hooked on Poe?

Sub-unit 1: Poetry

We have chosen three poems, D.H. Lawrence’s “The White Horse,” García Lorca’s “The Silence,” and Emily Dickinson’s “A narrow fellow in the grass,” that remain focused on visual imagery, even if each poem may point towards something abstract. These three poems provide an opportunity for students to begin the visual close reading that they will do throughout this unit. All three poems challenge the reader to “see” an image more than follow a story or explore an idea.

Students begin with “The White Horse,” where the language and imagery is fairly straightforward, and end with “A narrow fellow in the grass,” where the images are more elusive and rendered in complex language. However, even if students stumble a little in the complexity, each writer’s clear focus on the visual allows the reader to make mental pictures that can guide their understanding. There is almost always something that makes you say “oh, now I see” in the great poems—something that thrills a little when you find it.

In each poem, Lawrence, Lorca, and Dickinson emphasize the experience of observation, displaying the power that lies in the specificity of the image.

In the ELD Unit, students read only Emily Dickinson’s “A narrow fellow in the grass.”

Sub-unit 2: “The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe

Poe is a great read because almost every sentence is packed with sounds, psychology, suspense, and strangeness. The texts reward close reading—there is always a lot to notice, to figure out, and to talk about. Poe’s language, however, can seem to a young reader as if it is hiding something beneath the floorboards of its 19th-century vocabulary and syntax. Still, with a bit of questioning, noticing, rereading, and attention—the secrets are revealed. Poe was not trying to be difficult in these texts. He wrote them for a popular audience.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is short. It is a good starting point for middle school students because, if students can work through the 19th century language, the main events are easy to follow. The narrator tells the reader several times that he plans to kill the old man, and then he kills the old man. The narrator describes the heartbeat sounds over and over in multiple ways.

Many themes will emerge in a good classroom discussion of this story—what is madness? What is conscience? What is guilt and innocence?

These lessons are focused on the idea of “perspective”—looking in particular at how the events of the story are presented by the narrator versus how they are likely to be understood by a reader who realizes the narrator might be insane. The divergence between the reader’s perspective and the narrator’s perspective is a quite concrete instance of unreliable narration.

In the early lessons, you might feel compelled to help your students detect that this narrator is a bit crazy. In general, we recommend that you resist the urge to do so. Students will figure it out. Indeed, it may be more important for you to take the other side of the argument, pointing out just how sensible he seems to be—most of the time.

Sub-unit 3: “The Cask of Amontillado” by Edgar Allan Poe

As with “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the events of the story should be engaging for students to grasp: Montresor coaxes Fortunato—who continues to believe Montresor is his friend—into his catacomb in Venice and buries him alive for reasons that are a bit vague. Again, Poe’s agenda seems less a moralistic tale than a strange journey into the mind of his narrator. If the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is compelling because of his perverted sense of reality, many students will find Montresor’s seeming normalcy even more chilling: He seems so confident in his plan for revenge, so able to flatter his enemy into believing his good intentions. Perhaps he will remind students of some extreme version of friends and foes from their own world of middle school. Poe’s language will continue to be challenging, but they have one Poe story under their belt already, and their 19th century comprehension should be improving along with their adeptness with using visual cues as a reading anchor.

The “Cask of Amontillado” lessons take the idea of “reading like a movie director” to the next level. In this lesson sequence, students will start by simply reading the text, and trying to understand Montresor based on trying to view the story through his perspective. They then deepen their reading by designing the sets, selecting the actors, and defining the characters, based on particular details of the text. Once they have worked with the explicit details of Poe’s text, they will have a front row seat for the “making of” an animation by the Academy Award-winning Moonbot Studios. Their earlier close reading will allow them to watch this animation with a strong eye toward another director’s choice, and they will use this critical perception to write a movie.

This “read like a movie director” approach continues to offer concrete practice comparing the impact of the writer’s and filmmaker’s tools on the same story. More centrally, however, it is a continued exploration of how the practices of a movie director making a movie of a text align with the practices of a good close reader. Directors are asking the same questions: What is happening here? Who are these characters? What is the setting? What would one see from each character’s perspective? etc.

General note: Resist simplistic discussion of the “moral” of this story. Just as Fortunato never gets his Amontillado, readers don’t get a satisfying moral or a happy ending for the good guys/justice for the bad guys. Instead, this story abandons us—like Fortunato—in a dark and gloomy place. It is certainly about evil, but it doesn’t follow the conventions of good conquering evil.

Sub-unit 4: “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe

“The Raven” is a classic American poem that became popular as soon as Poe published it. It was like a hit song on the 1840s pop charts—kids used to follow Poe in the street flapping their wings like ravens. But also like many pop stars, Poe didn’t always get paid by his publishers, and he ended up addicted and poor despite his fame.

The poem was a hit for its unusual rhythms and rhymes and because of its mysterious, haunting subject matter. There was no such thing as a horror movie at the time, but maybe it chilled people like horror movies do today (though it has no murder, unless you are given to the unconventional interpretation—like Jefferson Mays advances in his interview in Lesson 5—that our narrator may have killed Lenore). The poem uses a lot of interior rhyme like rap often does; in fact there are a lot of rap treatments of it on the Internet, including this one: <https://www.projected.com/contests/30-rhythm-and-the-raven>.

“The Raven” is quite difficult and may even evade singular analysis. Even Poe remained skeptical of a dogmatic approach to poetry, writing that “a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul” (Edgar Allan Poe, “The Poetic Principle.” *Essays: English and American*. The Harvard Classics, p. 1909). For this reason, these lessons emphasize the experience of the poem, which has made it a lasting text in American literature.

Unit 7E: Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet*

Unit brief:

The first 12 lessons in this unit cover five excerpts from *Romeo and Juliet*, none of which is longer than about 40 lines. The purpose of these lessons is to introduce students to the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, to engage them in reading closely a selection of its most famous scenes, and to help them become familiar with Shakespearean English. Students should finish the unit having learned to spot and follow an extended metaphor, shown that they understand Shakespearean English by putting it into their own words, and become curious about the play in its entirety. These lessons are preparation for the study of the whole play, not a replacement for it. Because Shakespearean language is so challenging, these lessons do not require students to read the excerpts independently as homework.

In order to move students through the plot of the play the lessons are accompanied by illustrations in which the students can follow the events that transpire between excerpts. Students may have questions about

and interpretations of the illustrations they want to share. Such discussion is fine as a means of promoting engagement generally, but it is important to remind them that only the text itself is the “real” *Romeo and Juliet*, and that the illustrations are only there to provide context for the excerpts.

The lessons provide multiple opportunities for students to “translate” Shakespeare’s words into more contemporary language. At first students will work with individual words in “Fill in the Bard” exercises, then progress to paraphrasing lines and passages. The most important part of students’ translation work is the class discussion that follows it. There will never be one correct answer in finding equivalents for Shakespearean English, and the value of these exercises lies in the strategies and arguments students bring to bear in making their choices.

Several lessons also focus student attention on the form of Shakespeare’s language. Students will read two examples of the Shakespearean sonnet (the Prologue, and the lines Romeo and Juliet speak at their first meeting), the first of which they will memorize. While these lessons will teach students certain facts about such sonnets (14 lines, three quatrains, and a couplet, etc.) their primary intention is to show students the surprising and intriguing connections between what Shakespeare’s characters are saying and the way in which they say it. It is more important that students have rich discussions around that issue than that they know all of the rules that go to make a sonnet.

The unit ends with four lessons in which the students write a final essay.

General Note: a number of these lessons include time for showing film clips of the scenes. Each lesson will provide start and end times for the clips in two movies: Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 William Shakespeare’s *Romeo + Juliet*, and Franco Zeffirelli’s 1968 *Romeo and Juliet*, both available on DVD. You can choose the movie you prefer, or show both.

Sub-unit 1: *Romeo & Juliet*

This unit teaches passages from *Romeo and Juliet* because it is one of Shakespeare’s most accessible plays. It was first performed in 1662 and has rarely been out of production ever since. Countless film and stage adaptations exist around the world, demonstrating that the story of two young lovers defying their parents’ enmity to be with each other resonates across eras and cultures. The play combines romance with action, offering students a wide range of action to read about and act out themselves.

Middle school students are at the right age to identify with the lovers’ strong feelings. However, they are also old enough to think critically about the choices Romeo and Juliet make, and whether or not fate, or their parents, or they themselves bring about the play’s tragic end. We have selected the passages students read in order to show them examples of Shakespeare’s richest imagery, and expose them to many of the famous lines they will hear quoted throughout their lives.

Unit 7F: The Gold Rush Collection

Unit brief:

“...Men of every nation,
men of every shade,
men of every station,
men of every grade,
entering together
in the golden race.”

— From the Song of the Miner, by L.F.W
Mountain Democrat, Placerville, California, November 29, 1856

When Sam Brannan, savvy shopkeeper and the first gold rush millionaire, proclaimed “Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!” he sparked a migration of some 300,000 people. The promise of instant fortune drew people from all over the world and from all walks of life. San Francisco grew from a tiny community of about 200 in 1846 to a bustling town of nearly 36,000 by 1852. Roads were laid, railroads were built, and the California legislature was formed. The state thrived; the miners did not. They struggled with harsh living conditions, disease, and crime. Most of the fortune seekers did not strike it rich, instead, they left the gold fields poorer than when they arrived. And for Native Americans, the gold rush was a disaster. Their populations dropped from an estimated 150,000 in 1845 to approximately 30,000 in 1870. In this unit, students explore primary and secondary source documents and conduct independent research to better understand the complex story of the California Gold Rush.

Sub-unit: 1 The Gold Rush

The ELD sub-unit includes two passages from “Letter the Tenth: Amateur Mining—Hairbreadth ‘Scapes, &c.” from *The Shirley Letters from California Mines in 1851–1852* by Dame Shirley (Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe)

These letters written by Dame Shirley to her sister describe the harsh reality of working in the mines and collecting gold dust often for very low wages: “I am sorry I learned the trade, for I wet my feet, tore my dress, spoilt a pair of new gloves, nearly froze my fingers, got an awful headache, took cold, and lost a valuable breastpin, in this my labor of love.”