Unit Four - Literary and Comparative Essays
January/February

Welcome to the Unit

This is a unit on writing essays about reading. The goal is to help students who can already write essays about their lives transfer and adapt that skill so they are also able to write essays about books (and short texts) and eventually, to write essays that compare several texts. That is, this unit falls within the tradition of opinion/argument writing, but it is a unit on text-based reading. You’ll notice that this unit is scheduled to be taught simultaneously with the reading unit on interpretation and fantasy--this will allow for lots of higher levels of DOK, as children bring what the lenses they adopt in reading to their writing work. We expect that the close analytical reading that students do within the interpretation text set unit will go a long ways towards lifting the level of their thinking and writing about reading.

This essay unit is designed to stand on the shoulders of the fourth grade unit from the Units of Study series--Literary Essays: Writing About Reading. Because this is the first year that the books are out and your students have not experienced this foundational work, you may decide to borrow Literary Essay: Writing About Reading from a fourth grade colleague and teach from that book, for this one year only. It is significantly more advanced (and more CCSS-aligned) than the unit your students probably did experience in the old Literary Essays book. That said, many of you will decide that your students have a strong basis in literary essay and will instead want to forge ahead, teaching the unit outlined in this write-up. This decision is entirely up to you and should depend upon the skill level of the writers in your classroom.

This write-up will assume that you decide against teaching the fourth grade book, and will instead teach the fifth grade unit detailed below. To do this unit, your students will need to have written thesis-based essays before. This unit will be an important part of the education that sets children up for the high stakes tests (in New York State, last year the writing about reading portion of the high stakes test counted for 55% of the total score, so we are aware this is an important unit.) You should know that the content you are teaching in this unit is challenging for students, and that they will need all the opportunities for repeated practice that are described here.

By this point in the year, students have likely had lots of experience in working to meet the Common Core’s expectations for fifth graders in opinion writing. You’ll want to have your
data in hand about your students’ skills in opinion writing, and to be ready to help them develop any aspects of this where they are not yet meeting standards. As you will recall, the CCSS expects fifth graders to be “logical.” They are expected to “logically group ideas” (W 5.1) and “provide logically ordered reasons” (W 5.1b). You will want, therefore, to be sure that you help students make intentional choices about how to organize their essays. This unit of course aligns well with the CCSS’s emphasis on students learning, by fifth grade, to write arguments about texts as well as about topics. All in all, the unit will help prepare your students for the demands of writing quick, well-structured essays grounded in textual evidence when they encounter high stakes tests.

Overview

**Essential Question:** How can I read closely, and write structured, evidenced-based interpretive essays, including a compare and contrast essay?

**Bend I: Writing Powerful, Interpretive Essays Off of One Text**

*How can I draw on everything I know about writing about reading and about essays to go through the entire process of writing a literary essay about a story? In doing so, can I write-to-grow ideas that are central to the story and are also grounded in close reading, and can I use evidence from the text and reflection to support my claim?*

**Bend II: Writing Across Texts—Once, and Then Again with Increased Skill**

*How can I transfer what I know about writing a literary essay to the challenge of writing a comparative literary essay*

**Getting Ready**

**Organizing for the Unit**

You will need to decide from the outset how much time you are going to spend in each part of the unit. For example, if you know that your students have struggled with literary essays that focus on a single text, you may want to do two rounds of Bend I and spend less time on the higher level comparative work. Then too, you may decide you want to spend more time helping children to hone the comparative essay, and less time with the foundational work in Bend I. If you are not moving from this unit into a test prep unit in which students crank out quick literary essays, you may choose to have your students end the unit by taking a few days to write quick literary essays. If you'll be working on that during test prep, then you needn't include it in this unit.
Materials for the Unit

Because this unit has a reading component, you will need to spend some time beforehand planning for the texts students will write about. Throughout Literary Essay: Writing About Fiction, Grade 4, we suggest several texts you might give children to read and analyze, noting the importance of having a range of texts so that students can read those that are at a just-right level for them. We made purposeful decisions regarding texts’ Lexile and Guided Reading Levels, attempting to present students with a balance of complex and accessible texts. For instance, as one of our main touchstone texts, we use Fox by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks. While the Lexile level is 500 because of the texts’ short length and pithy sentences, it is immediately clear to any reader that to truly understand Fox, one must be able to grapple with issues of human desire and motivation, the relationship between setting and mood, author’s intent, archetypal characters and symbolism. We encourage you to use any text that is replete with opportunities for character study, interpretation work, and analysis of author’s craft, and to choose one that feels appropriate Lexile-wise, as well.

For fifth grade, we suggest a few of the following short texts: Any of a dozen stories from Every Living Thing by Cynthia Rylant (Lexile 870L), excerpts from Woman Hollering Creek and The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros, some of which are included in the fifth grade Units of Study box set and which range in Lexile levels from 870L to 960L. Because this unit will likely align with your fantasy reading unit, you might also consider exposing children to a short story like “Family Monster” by Pamela Service from the compilation But That’s A Another Story, edited by Sandy Asher. This story is a time travel fantasy which is the grade level text complexity expected by the Common Core (840L). Because students will be writing about a text at the very start of the unit, chances are good you’ll want to channel them toward writing about something familiar (perhaps a short text read during an earlier character unit or one done as a class read aloud).

(You may be interested to hear that we have found that in some ways, it is easiest for children to write literary essays about a short text such as a short story or a picture book, and in other ways, we’ve found this is more difficult for children. Certainly when youngsters write about a short text, it is easier for them to know that text really well, rereading it several times and mining it in conversations with others. Then, too, they can locate evidence easily without spending lots of time rereading to find excerpts. On the other hand, any theory a child might espouse will probably have thinner substantiating support when the text on hand is a short one. For example, if a child claims that Gabriel, in the three-page long story "Spaghetti" by Cynthia Rylant is lonely, there will not be endless bits of evidence the child can draw upon to make this case.)

Assuming that you want students to write about short texts for the first part of the unit, we recommend you provide them with a small folder containing a little stack of familiar short
texts, letting the writer select which of those texts ‘speaks’ to him or her. When writers have choices and can write about topics and texts they care about, the writing is better. In this instance, we have found providing a choice of text helps, although what matters most of all is that writers are able to choose what to say about the selected text. If you provide children with a small collection of short texts, be sure that you offer texts that are calibrated to the levels at which your diverse readers can read, and be sure the texts are complex enough and well written enough to offer intellectual challenges to your students. Stories that are rich, complex, and well-crafted reward close study.

Here is one suggestion: Look ahead to the start of the write-up on comparative essays. If you are thinking of asking students to go from writing a literary essay to writing a comparative essay, keep that information to yourself but choose two accessible texts that could easily go into a compare and contrast text set, and two more complex texts that could again go into a compare and contrast text set. You might offer two other texts as well, just to allow some choice—but keeping in mind the work you’ll ask students to do later. As you gather these texts, you might also consider including previous read-alouds and texts read as mentor texts in writing workshop. Remember also that by the time students are writing comparative essays, they will likely have read a novel (or a few novels) in their fantasy book clubs which could serve as one of the texts to be compared and contrasted. Again, for those who will likely need more support, you will want to consider now what texts could be easily compared and contrasted with the novels they are reading. A little behind the scenes engineering will pay off immensely for students’ productivity.

You will probably select one text as the mentor text for the work that the whole class does, threading that one short story through many minilessons, using your responses to it (and the class’s responses to it) as a way to show children how people go about reading, thinking, and writing about that one story. You’ll plan to chart what you do with that one story, using words that can apply to any writer and any text, and then those charts can remind children of the work they can do with their own stories. For the purposes of this write-up, we have chosen a text you know well by now: *Home of the Brave* by Katherine Applegate.

**Assessment**

*Establishing a Baseline Before the Unit Begins*

You and your school will need to decide whether you will have assessed your students as opinion writers first at the very start of the year and then periodically throughout the year (which we recommended as you’ll see the most growth if your data starts prior to September) or whether you will just have assessed opinion writing before your first
opinion unit (the argument essay unit.) Either way, you’ll probably have done an on-demand assessment prior to this unit that can function as the base line for this unit, using this as the prompt:

“Think of a topic or issue that you know and care about, an issue around which you have strong feelings. Tomorrow, you will have forty-five minutes to write an opinion or argument text in which you will write your opinion or claim and tell reasons why you feel that way. When you do this, draw on everything you know about essays, persuasive letters and reviews. If you want to find and use information from a book or another outside source, you may bring that with you tomorrow. Please keep in mind that you’ll have forty-five minutes to complete this, so you will need to plan, draft, revise, and edit in one sitting. In your writing, make sure you:

- “Write an introduction
- State your opinion or claim
- Give reasons and evidence
- Organize your writing
- Acknowledge counterclaims
- Use transition words
- Write a conclusion”

The important thing is not that you ask students to write an on-demand opinion essay, but that you assess what they do and use what you learn to help you make sure your teaching starts where students are and takes them as far as they can go. You will want to use the opinion writing learning progression and checklists provided in the publication *Units of Study in Opinion, Information and Narrative Writing* to help you assess your students. If you do not have the new Unit of Study books, and you work in a TCRWP school, you’ll have copies of the opinion learning progression and checklists. You and your colleagues can decide whether you will be responsible for assessing each of your students, or whether you will take a random cross section to assess with great care and rely on student self-assessments as well. Either way the important thing is for you to think about what you learn by studying what your students do, so don’t spend all your time assigning, collecting, counting, and leave no time for reflecting!

The descriptors become especially useful when you want to help writers know specific steps they can take to make their writing better. That is, if a writer’s essay is mostly level 5, you and that writer can look at the descriptors of, say, elaboration for level 5 and note whether the writing adheres to those. If so, tell that child—or your whole class, if this is broadly applicable—“You used to elaborate by…,” and read the descriptors from level 4, “but now you…,” and read the level 5 descriptor. “Can I give you a pointer about a way to make your writing even better? Try…,” and then you can read from the level 6 descriptor.
You can even say, “Let me show you an example,” and to do so, you can cite a section from one of the level 6 exemplar texts that are provided in the *Units of Study on Opinion, Information and Narrative Writing* series.

You may decide that because writing about reading is especially high stakes, you want to get your students to do a pre-assessment which is specific for this unit, rather than using the post-assessment from the argument writing unit as your pre-assessment. If you make that decision, you may want to rally kids by suggesting that you’d love for them to “show off” what they know about opinion writing, and especially opinion writing about reading. You might say you can’t wait to see how strong they’ve become at writing about reading, after all the work they did in the research-based argument writing unit.

Either way, when this unit ends, you’ll repeat the pre-assessment prompt exactly, and when you collect the student writing and look between the first on-demand and the second, the progress that you see will allow for an assessment not only of your students but also of your teaching, and of this curriculum, too. We have found that when you teach knowing that judgment day will not revolve around the published texts that writers produced with your input (and ours) but will, instead, revolve around what writers do without any input in an on-demand situation, this serves as a reminder that the goal of any writing instruction is not to produce strong *writing*. It is to produce strong *writers*. If we teach in ways that lift the level of today’s piece of writing, but that teaching does not leave writers able to do better work another day, on another piece, then that teaching is for naught. The good news is that will not be the case! You’ll look back on the baseline data you collect at the start of this unit and at the work students eventually produce, and you’ll say, “Look at this progress!”

**Bend I: Writing Powerful, Interpretive Essays Off of One Text**

From the get-go, students will learn to write structured, compelling essays in which they make and support claims and analyze, unpack, and incorporate evidence. In Bend I, you’ll remind students of the work they did in *Research-Based Argument Essay*, in which they will have been taught strategies for doing much of this challenging work. Students will focus on arguing for ideas about characters and themes while carrying forward what they have been taught about planning and drafting boxes-and-bullets essay, writing introductions and conclusions, and marshaling evidence in support of reasons. This allows the main focus of teaching to be devoted to the special challenges of writing interpretive essays about literary texts.

*Collecting Ideas Worth Arguing For*
To write well about reading, students not only need to learn more about writing; they also need to learn more about reading. Throughout the unit, students are taught the value of close reading of texts. From Day One, students will learn to read literature closely—and to write about the literature they are reading. On each of the first few days of the unit, you may decide to demonstrate a way of reading and writing off of a story, and then invite children to draw from this repertoire of strategies as they work with any text they choose from their packets. You can teach children that just as essayists pay attention to our lives, expecting to grow ideas from this wide-awake attentiveness, so, too, literary essayists pay attention to texts. It is particularly effective to teach them that writers can capture an image that stays with us after we finish reading a story and then try to explain why that image is the one that stays, exploring how that image fits with the whole story. If you find children need more support with close reading, you might consult Session 1 and Session 9 from Literary Essay, both of which teach children strategies for reading closely and interpretively.

To help writers linger longer with the beauty of the language of a text, you might teach them that writers can pull one line or a couple lines of text and copy it onto a page of a notebook and then use writing to help themselves figure out why they found that line so powerful. You might also teach writers that it can pay off to record a turning point in the book, exploring how this moment fits with the whole book or to write about how they might live differently if they took the story really seriously.

Of course, you will not want to suggest a strategy, show it, and then expect every writer to use that same strategy in sync with each other, each using it to explore a different text from the packet of texts. Instead, you will want writers to draw from the toolkit (or reservoir—you choose the image that works), of possible strategies, and to often use one, then another, in sequence. What is key is to emphasize to students the value of rereading and reconsidering texts and continuing to read yourself further awake on each reading. Whatever strategy students choose to use, the goal of this work is the same: looking closely at texts to not just read them but really read, reread, revisit, and reconsider all of their details and nuances. You might begin to push children to start annotating some of this thinking in their short texts or in novels on Post-its.

One minilesson that you may want to consider, regardless of whether your writers are adept at essay or not, is to teach them that essayists know ahead of time that some places are rich ground for literary analysis. You might teach this as an inquiry lesson to place a higher cognitive demand on your writers and ask them to investigate what times in text seem most worthy of pausing over to look for ideas. You can gather their ideas to co-construct a class chart. If students do not mention certain types of moments, you might help them to notice that they can try to consider moments of character change, the lessons that characters are learning, and the issues (personal or social) that the characters are
facing to gain entry points toward great thinking. Similarly, you might remind students (if needed) that they can focus in on parts of the story—whether it is their favorite part or image, a part that was upsetting or disturbing, or the part of the book that most reminds them of their life, will open up other possibilities for rich ideas.

**Elaborating on Ideas in Order to Deepen, Extend and Revise Thinking**

After a few days of collecting, you will want to be sure that each of your students have settled upon the text that he or she will write about so that now all the work the writers do accumulates, and you will want to also channel children to select bits of their writing and their thinking that seem especially important and to begin to elaborate on those ideas. Writers can look closely at the text they’ve selected and write about aspects of that text that stand out, writing "I see..." and then writing what they notice in the text. Encourage them to write long about this, extending their observation by using thought prompts such as, "The surprising thing about this is..." or "The important thing about this is..." or "The thought this gives me is...." or "I wonder if...."

As you continue with elaborating, you will want to remind students of the work they are already familiar with when thinking about characters and making interpretations. Remind students that questions like, "What really matters about this book?" and "What is this text really about?" often yield strong ideas. This work might help students to understand that the work of literary essay is not brand new; it is simply a more sophisticated way of doing the work your readers and writers are already doing.

At this point in the unit, you can charge students with transferring and applying all they have learned about writing to think. You might put up charts from previous units and let students know that you will watch them as they go about this work, afterwards teaching into what you see them needing. For example, if needed, you might remind children of their work in the interpretive essay unit, when they observed their lives and created “thought patches” in their notebooks by writing, “The thought I have about this is...” or “This makes me realize that....” If students are not applying this work, you might teach them to see that in this unit, they can pause as they read to observe what is happening to a character and then grow an idea using the same sentence starters. You can teach children that these “thought patches” can be extended, and that they can use “thought prompts” to grow their thinking. Be aware that children are apt to try to extend their thinking by providing examples only, and you will want to help them to linger with their ideas, too. Teach them to record an idea using new words by saying, “That is...” or “In other words...” and then rephrasing the idea. Teach them to entertain possibilities by writing, “Could it be that...,” “Perhaps...,” or “Some may say that...” Phrases such as “Furthermore...,” “This connects with...,” “On the other hand...,” “But you might ask...,” “This is true because...,” or “I am realizing that...” can also keep children elaborating upon their ideas. If you hope that
children will write literary essays in which they articulate the lessons they believe a character learns in a story, or essays that name the theme or idea a text teaches, then it will be important for you to provide children with strategies for growing these sorts of ideas in particular. In *Literary Essay*, you’ll find charts of prompts for pushing thinking on page 28 and page 111, both of which can support you in this work.

Many of us have found that collecting fantastic entries in our classroom and using them as powerful mentors helps writers visualize what it is we are pushing them to do. These entries can also inspire you to create your own minilessons that spotlight your students’ work. You might consider a mid-workshop teaching point where the class analyzes what is making a certain entry in your room shine. This will articulate for students the moves that they too should be making in their writing and help students to work at a higher level of DOK.

*Writing Thesis Statements, and Planning Boxes-and-Bullets*

After children have collected responses-to-reading in their writers’ notebooks, remind them that they already know how to reread a notebook in order to find seed ideas. Here you will push your students to transfer and apply what they have learned, watching them choose seed ideas and teaching into what you see them needing as well as raising the level of their work. You will want to see students choosing seed ideas that are central to a text and provocative. If they need reminders, you can also teach children to generate possible seed ideas. Teach them that essay writers find and test their theses. They begin by rereading all their related entries and asking, ‘What is the big idea I really want to say?’ It often helps to gather a bunch of possible thesis statements about a text, imagine the possibilities for how you’ll support each idea, and then choose one. There are a few templates that seem to especially work for literary essays. Help writers to use these with elasticity so they are still able to write about the ideas that matter most to them. Some writers will have a claim about a character or a text, and then give reasons for that claim, as they did in their research-based argument essays. "So and so is a good friend because A, because B, and above all because C." Or, “So and so succeeds because of A, B, and above all, because of C." Or, “This is about so and so who learns/turns out to be/changes to be/becomes (what, by the end). Early in the text (in contrast)…Later in the text....”

For example, “*Because of Winn-Dixie* is the story of a lonely girl, Opal, who learns that she isn’t alone after all. In the beginning of the story, she is lonely, and by the end, the whole town has become peopled with people she cares about.” Or, “*Spaghetti* is the story of a lonely boy, Gabriel, who learns to open himself to love. At the beginning of the story…” There is another template that often works well for literary essays—journey of thought essays. These often begin, “At first I thought….but now I realize....” Students may write “When I first read ...., I thought it was about (the external plot driven story) but now,
rereading it, I realize it is about (the internal story)” Or, ”Some people think...is about (the external plot) but I think that it is really about (the deeper meaning).” This thesis would lead a writer to first write about the plot, the external story, and then write about the theme, or the under-story.

Other students may wish to write a thesis statement that follows a different structure: ”My feelings about ___ are complicated. On the one hand, I think...On the other hand, I think...” In this structure, students can explore how their feelings or ideas about a story, character, or theme are conflicted—the reader feels more than one thing at the same time. “My feelings about Jeremy from Those Shoes are complicated. On the one hand I think he is generous and selfless, and on the other hand I think he cares too much about what others think.” Whatever the structure you choose, you will need to help each child revise his or her “seed idea” so that it is a clear thesis, making sure it is a claim or an idea, not a fact, phrase or a question.

Implicit in all of these thesis statements is the plan for the essay. If the essay is ”My feelings about...are complicated. On the one hand, I think... On the other hand, I think...” make no doubt about it. Each of these ”On the one hands” become the topic sentences for different paragraphs. And if the thesis is, ”At first I thought..., then I realized....” those, too, set up the separate parts of the essay.

**Finding Evidence to Best Support a Claim and Weaving that Evidence Into a Cohesive Essay**

Once a child has planned his or her “boxes-and-bullets” for a literary essay, the child will need to collect the information and insights needed to build the case. You can decide whether you’ll encourage each child to make a file for each topic sentence (and each support paragraph). For example, if the child’s claim is, ”Cynthia Rylant’s story ‘Spaghetti’ is the story of a lonely boy who learns from a tiny stray kitten to open himself to love,” the child might title one file, ”Gabriel is a lonely boy” and another, ”Gabriel learns to open himself to love.” Each of these files eventually will become a paragraph, (or more), in the final essay. On the other hand, students can collect and write straight onto draft paper, working with one page on one paragraph, and on another page, with another paragraph.

You may teach your writers to gather evidence for each of their subordinate points by retelling a part of the story that supports their idea, then ‘unpacking’ that part, writing about how it illustrates their idea. Your writers will likely need to be taught to find evidence that supports their thesis. You will want to encourage them to look for places in the text that are significant to the overall meaning of the story, as often these are the parts that best support an argument about a text. You might show students to notice when the author has spent time stretching a scene out or repeating images. You will need to help
them retell the portion of the text in such a way that they angle it to fit their idea. The Share in Session 4 of Literary Essays: Writing About Fiction can help you imagine some of the ways you might guide children to make these choices.

You will need to remind writers how to quote from a text and how to unpack these quotes by talking about how the quote addresses the relevant big idea. When children are doing this work, it is helpful to have extra copies of the texts or pages they are using so that children can cut out relevant parts and paste them onto their drafts, and then write how the part supports their thesis. Then, writers try another part and another and another. This takes out the labor intensive work of copying the lines and puts more emphasis on the intellectual work of considering which evidence is best suited to prove an idea, how to retell in an angled manner, and how to unpack the evidence. After teaching children to find relevant details and quotes, you might say: “Today I want to teach you that literary essayists don’t just cite text details, they explain how those details relate back to their thesis. They often use phrases like ‘this shows...’ or ‘this proves...’ to help connect details and ideas.” This will help students to write in cohesive and organized way about their evidence.

Revising, Editing and Publishing

You will want to charge students with transferring and applying all that they have learned about developing an essay—ordering evidence, transitioning from one idea to another, writing with a convincing tone, creating introductions and conclusions that orient and engage the reader, and so on. You will want to show writers how to write introductory paragraphs that include a tiny summary of the story and then present the thesis statement. It can be helpful to teach children that literary essayists often begin by putting their particular essay, and/or the particular text they are writing about, into context. They write a generalization about literature, or stories, or life—one that acts as the broad end of a funnel—channeling readers so they are ready for the specific point the essayist sets forth in the thesis statement. Closing paragraphs will probably be a place to link the story’s message to the writer’s own life—the ending is a good place for a Hallmark moment! “This story teaches me that I, too...” An alternative is to link this story to another story, or even to a social issue in the world. Also, as students revise their essays, they will want to read their drafts carefully—most likely with a writing partner—looking for places where there are gaps (in thinking or transitions) and fill those gaps as they revise. A mentor essay can help children to envision the way their own essays might go, and the revisions they need to make. In Session 8 of Literary Essay, fourth graders are asked to engage in an inquiry of an essay written about Fox. You might consider using this text again, now, as children study models of good writing.
Finally, of course we will want to teach our writers a lesson or two about editing their essays. First we will build on the editing work we have done across the year—encouraging students to make smarter and smarter choices about paragraphing, ending punctuation and the like. In essays we also have a great opportunity to teach into verb tense, as oftentimes verbs switch tense during an essay. That is to say that when we are discussing our thinking we sometimes use the present tense, “Gabriel is lonely,” and when we are retelling we sometimes switch to the past tense, “Gabriel saw the cat.” This, of course, can be confusing for our writers and we will want to be prepared to help them make good choices, and understand the choices they are making (CCSS L 5.1). Here you can decide to have students put their drafts aside, knowing that you will support them in returning to these later and revising them with strategies learned during later parts of the unit. You might also choose to have students celebrate with a mini publishing of their work at this point.

_A Celebration_

You may or may not decide to have children publish this first round of essays, though we recommend that you do not, instead reserving the extra time for the two bends ahead. Just because students are putting their revised, edited, but un-published pieces in their folders _does not_ mean you won’t want to take this opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments in some way. For a celebration of the writing, you might have students share their writing with a small group and write quick compliments to each other. You’ll likely want to give them an opportunity to reflect on the progress they’ve made, pat themselves on the back, and set goals for the next round of literary essay writing. Regardless of what you choose, help children feel accomplished and rally their energy for the next bend of writing.

**Bend II: Writing Across Texts—Once, and Then Again with Increased Skill**

After drafting and revising essays about a familiar short text in Bend I, students will be given feedback on their first cycle of essay writing, and then asked to repeat that cycle in the second bend, this time applying all they have learned to writing across _two_ texts. On the first day of this new bend, you will launch a small sequence of work that aims to teach youngsters the ways that a reader brings what they notice from one text to another. Highly literate people have the ability to make comparisons across texts. It is a marker of literacy, and one we want for our students. Writing comparative literary essays is one way to cultivate this. Writing about more than one text offers powerful opportunities for comparing and contrasting characters and themes in stories. This work also invites students to think about how different texts can offer views on a subject that are in some ways similar and in some ways different. This kind of thinking and writing demands that a
writer synthesize and analyze, and it requires a writer to pay attention not only to the subject of a text but also to an author’s treatment of that subject. This leads a young person to notice matters of point of view, emphasis, and interpretation and it also leads that young reader to be aware of the different craft moves that the authors of the different texts have used. All of this work is very much a part of the new Common Core State Standards and it is the work in which students are engaging in reading workshop as they study how author’s develop themes differently. You can teach students to draw upon all of that work and transfer and apply their learning to their writing. This is not easy work, and that is why you will take students through the process twice, cycling through one compare and contrast essay in Bend II and yet another in Bend III.

In order to introduce youngsters to the concept of comparing and contrasting two texts, you might want to suggest they first compare two objects. That is, students may compare, say, a basketball and a football, or a pen and a pencil. This can be done through "writing-in-the-air," where students are talking out how the writing would go, or it could be done through some shared writing, with the class contributing to one compare and contrast text. Then again, if the whole class compared and contrasted pencils and pens, each writer could think of his or her own objects and do similar work—a dog and a cat, an iPod and a radio, a Ford and a Honda. You could use the concrete presence of the items to show writers different ways to go about doing this work. One way to proceed would be to take one item—the pen, the Honda—and to talk/write about it, touching on a few key features. Then the "writer" could pick up the second object—the pencil, the Ford—and try to talk about each of the same features, showing how that features is a bit different for the second item. The interesting thing to point out for writers is that when talking about a basketball, for example, there might be all kinds of ways to describe it, but when comparing it to a football, certain qualities become more essential to the description: its shape, its color, what it’s filled with, and so forth. So you could be teaching students that actually one can’t begin with the one object and proceed to the next, instead one need to do some bird’s eye thinking about the two subjects, laying out the features that merit attention. This will allow students to become familiar with the structure and feel of comparison essays before asking them to work with the added complication of the two texts.

When your students move from writing about pens and pencils to writing about texts, you will need to gauge the number of days you have left in the unit in order to calculate the work you’ll ask them to do. It could be that the quickest way to give them an immersion course in comparative essay writing is to suggest they read a story that is in some ways like and in some ways different than the story they wrote about in their literary essay. They will have already thought deeply about one text, and will probably therefore be able to fairly quickly juxtapose the second text to the first. That is, if one student had written her first essay about story A, you may channel her to write her comparative essay comparing and contrasting story A and story B. Meanwhile, if another student wrote about story B in his
first essay, you may channel him to also compare and contrast story A and story B. Of course, you may create your own text sets or encourage students to decide for themselves which stories make sense for comparison (they can use the novels they are reading in reading workshops, too!) Either way, you could show students that a compare and contrast essay can literally be written in a single day, and of course you’d suggest writers follow the structure you taught them as they were writing about pens and pencils, or Hondas and Fords. As mentioned earlier, you may push your writers to use a novel in this part of the unit. At this point in reading workshop, your students have finished one or more novels and have done deep interpretation work to determine larger ideas themes. You might now involve them in comparing and contrasting those novels to the short texts they used in the first part of this writing unit or a previous read aloud. If you feel your students need more help building the muscles to compare and contrast, you’ll find helpful tips and strategies in Session 15 and 16 of Literary Essay: Writing About Fiction. You will also find child-written essays at the end of that book, which your current students can study and analyze before venturing to write their own. You might teach them, as you have in other genres, that before writing a new kind of text, authors study published versions of that text—in this case, compare and contrast essays. As they study a published text they ask: “How does this sort of writing seem to go? What parts does it have?” You can collect students observations on a class chart entitled, “When Crafting Compare and Contrast Essays, Writers...” or have kids annotate the essay in groups and keep it in their writing folders for reference and support. We have also provided samples at the end of this write-up that you might show to students.

**Collecting: Developing More Sophisticated Interpretations About Texts**

One of the goals for both Bend II and Bend III is to have children dig deeper into texts and write about more sophisticated interpretations. You will want to see all of the work that students are doing in reading workshop to interpret and analyze the text transferred to their writing. You’ll want to support students in remembering that it is in subtle nuances and details of texts that themes are developed and help them to revisit texts and annotate them with more complex interpretations. The work students have done and are doing in reading workshop to compare, contrast, and analyze texts fits naturally with their writing work.

Part of your teaching in this portion of the unit will be helping your writers to move beyond ideas that are single descriptors of characters, such as: “Gabriel is a lonely boy.” To continue to push students toward more complex thesis statements, teach students to revisit themes or big ideas found in earlier books and remember the work they did to come up with them. You may also teach them to look for an image or object that was used and think about why and how it was used to bring out the significance of the part. Or you may want to teach them to look at moments where a character has strong feelings or reactions.
and think about why the character is feeling or reacting this way, and then to consider possible lessons. You can also teach your writers to pay close attention to times when characters have insights or learn something, and to search for universal lessons in these moments of insight. Any of these methods can lead to a rich, more sophisticated thesis statement.

You may decide that you can give a bit more time to this work, in which case you may specifically teach students that, just as literary essayists know ahead of time that some places are rich ground for literary analysis, they know that some things are rich ground for literary comparison. For example, writers are apt to explore the ways the theme is and is not the same across the two texts, or thinking about ways in which character's lessons or changes are and are not the same across the two texts. You might say: “Literary essayists read closely and carefully, developing new ideas and insights as they read through a text. One way to extend their thinking is by taking an idea they developed about one text and using it as a lens to study a second text. This often involves asking the question, ‘Does this idea apply to this second text? If so, how and where?’” You can remind students of the work they are currently doing in reading workshop, thinking of other texts, poems, stories that connect to the theme and use these texts as well as ideas they have already come up with to connect to the other text. You’ll also want to teach children to compare and contrast the structural and language choices an author makes. You might begin by saying: “Today I want to teach you that literary essayists pay attention not only to what a text says, but how the text says it. Readers know that an author deliberately crafts a story—or any text—in ways that highlight deeper meaning. They can compare and contrast the different ways in which authors do this.” Session 13 of Literary Essay can help you to envision the work you might do in a minilesson on author’s craft.

As students work, you’ll want to be ready to give some tips about their essays. One of the important things to teach is that a compare and contrast essay is always expected to do both—to compare and also contrast. Even if the texts are largely different, it is wise for a writer to push himself or herself to also think of similarities, although these can be more minor. You may literally teach students to write, “These stories are similar in X and in Z,” planning then to elaborate both in paragraphs that begin with topic sentences such as, “Although X and Y are (some way they are different), they are similar because (they explore the same theme).”

Then again, they could write a thesis that goes like this: “Both [title] and [title] are stories about ____.” This kind of thesis statement will lead students to write about theme, as in “Both Those Shoes and ‘Stray’ are stories about longing and learning to appreciate what you have.” Or, “The characters in ___ and ___ in...are both__.” For example, a claim might go like this: “Both Opal from Because of Winn-Dixie and Doris from 'Stray' are lonely.” This structure has students writing about how two characters are similar. Of course, this same
structure works for differences, as in, “The difference between [character’s name] and [character's name] is...” or, "Unlike [character's name in [title], [other character in other book] is..."

To take this a step further, student could also write about how both characters are similar, and how they are different: “While both Opal from Because of Winn-Dixie and Doris from 'Stray' are lonely, the two characters are lonely for different reasons.” Or, “What's the same about these two stories or characters is...What's different about these two stories is...” Or, “The characters in [title] and [title] are similar and different in several ways.” Or, “Both the characters in [title] and [title] are ____, but while ____ is ____, ____ is ____.” Or, “Both stories ___ and ___ deal with the theme of ____ , but while...” Whatever the structure you choose, you will need to help each child revise his or her “seed idea” so that it is a clear thesis, making sure it is a claim or an idea, not a fact, phrase or a question, and that it works across both texts.

**Planning a Compare-and-Contrast Draft**

As in the first literary essay, planning a comparative essay does not necessarily go just one way. Depending on the essayist's thesis statement, the plan for the essay will vary. If a student is comparing themes in the books, then their boxes-and-bullets may contain three reasons why these books are about this theme, or three different things these books are saying about this theme, or two reasons why the theme is similar in these books and one reason why it is different. Or if students are writing about two characters, either in the same book or across texts, then their boxes-and-bullets will need to reflect that structure. Theirs might look like three ways the characters are the same, or perhaps one to two ways in which they are same and one way in which they differ.

There are two common structures for comparative essay that you may want to teach your students, and they can then decide which will work better for them. One structure is called "block" essay structure. Using the block structure, students write one body paragraph, or one section of the body that may include more than one paragraph, all about one text, text A, and the second body paragraph or section to write about the second text, text B. Thus, the bullets in a boxes and bullets plan would have one bullet for one text and one bullet for the second text. A second possible structure has more synthesized body paragraphs: Each body paragraph includes discussions of both texts. It could be that one body paragraph explores the similarities in the texts, and another the differences. This structure is commonly called “point by point.” An example of such a plan might be as follows:

The Great Gilly Hopkins and Homecoming show that sometimes in life, people will do anything for the ones they love.
Mrs. Trotter will do anything for Gilly and Dicey will do anything for her brothers and sisters.

Mrs. Trotter accepts Gilly's nastiness and turns the other cheek while Dicey won't accept the conditions her brothers and sister are forced to live in and she takes a bold stand and has them all run away.

Because it is indeed a very tricky thing for a writer to choose the structure of their essay, it sometimes takes a few tries before a writer finds the right fit. You may want to have at your disposal a few examples, or templates, of how literary essays might be structured. You might teach your writers how to organize their supports (bullets) both by block and point by point.

As mentioned earlier, we have included a sample essay in each format, so that both you and your students can see how they go. Your students will find it easier to plan if they can envision what the essay will look like, so taking time to study mentor texts would be worthwhile. You may use the essays as they are here, or write your own using texts that are familiar to your students. Once again, the more that you and your colleagues have written your own essays together and with your students, the easier this work goes.

**Finding Evidence**

Once a child has planned his or her “boxes-and-bullets” for a comparative essay, the child will need to collect the evidence and insights needed to support the claim. Again, writers will gather evidence by retelling a part of the story that supports their idea, writing a brief summary of a relevant part of the story (or cutting it from a photocopied version and taping it onto draft paper), using lists of moments that support their idea, or explaining the craft moves that the writer used that reveal the idea the child is asserting. For example, you might teach students that the way in which we retell a moment can angle that retell to fit our idea. Word choice becomes central to angling our stories, as does only including the parts that fit our idea. Writers can also draw on what they are learning about analyzing point of view and discuss how themes are developed differently through the way that events are described.

Alternately, and due to the pace of this unit, you might choose to have children bypass the process of gathering information into files, instead using rough forms of outlines to plan the content of a paragraph, then writing one support paragraph on one page, and the other on another page. Either way, you will probably want to have students collect quotes from the texts that support their ideas during this stage as well.

*Drafting, Revising, and Editing*
As your students prepare to draft their essays, bring their minds back to all they learned while writing their first literary essays. This should not feel like brand new work for the students, but an iteration of what they have already done. You will want to charge them with taking themselves through the process with greater independence, involving them in creating checklists, to-do lists, and other tools, if needed, to monitor their own progress. Teach students to keep an eye out and revise for clarity, perhaps beginning: “When essayists first learn to write compare and contrast essays, they often find that their ideas become tangled and jumbled. When this happens, they often reread their writing, noting the different points they are trying to make and using paragraphs to set each one apart from the other.”

Transitional phrases can also help to clarify the parts of comparative essays. Students will likely already feel comfortable with a variety of transitional phrases, and will need to implement them to begin and end introductions, body paragraphs and conclusions, as well as to connect ideas and evidence.

You will surely need to plan for small-group teaching, as students will be writing within different structures. Teaching a lesson on introductions and conclusions will likely be necessary as well. You may want to teach students how to include information about both texts in the introduction. This might look like a brief summary of both texts, “Those Shoes is about... and ‘Stray’ is about...” Or, you may want to teach how essayists sometimes discuss the importance of stories in their introductions: “Both of these stories are important because...” For their conclusions, some may sum up what was said already, with added inspirational lines as a closing. These lines may be similar to what they learned earlier: They might comment on a social issue connected to the theme from the books explored in the essay, or they might connect the ideas in the essay to the writer’s life. Others may explore the differences between the two texts, especially if the body of their essays explored only the similarities. For example, you might teach how the stories end in different ways or that while characters are similar in their traits or desires, their reasons for their feelings may differ.

Just as students did when revising their first literary essays and as described in the session, “Packaging and Polishing Literary Essays,” they will want to read their drafts carefully—most likely with a writing partner—looking for places where there are gaps (in thinking or transitions), and fill those gaps as they revise. As students are doing large-scale revisions on their draft, you might now rally them to revisit the draft of their literary essay and revise this draft using all they have learned across this unit. You might remind writers to reconsider their goals and the student-facing Opinion Writing Continuum. By self-assessing their work against expectations, students can revise all of their drafts to ensure that each piece of writing reveals all of their newest learning and therefore is an example of best work.
You will surely want to help students polish their essays with one or two lessons on editing. Comparative essays provide an opportunity for exploring complex sentence structures. Teaching a lesson on appositive commas or beginning sentences with dependent clauses would help students’ writing to sound more sophisticated.

**Celebration**

For a celebration of the writing, you might have students lay their first literary essay and their comparative essay side by side, and have students visit each other’s writing, complimenting as they go, or setting up a rotating display in the classroom that highlights the two books as a pair, with the comparative essays tucked inside one of the books, creating a suggested path for reading for others in the class. You could also consider posting their essays on [Goodreads.com](http://Goodreads.com).
Appendix

Sample Essay# 1:

Block structure:
- Introduction
- Story 1 and its analysis
- Story 2 and its analysis
- Conclusion

In *Those Shoes*, by Maribeth Boelts, and “Stray,” by Cynthia Rylant, we meet two characters whose longing for something that their families cannot afford brings them close to despair, but then sheds a different light on what is already in their worlds but not fully appreciated or explored. Reading these two stories has made me realize that although we may search outside of ourselves and our relationships for happiness, there is nothing so valuable as our connections to the people closest to us, and nothing so fulfilling as strengthening those connections.

In the story *Those Shoes*, Jeremy longs for a pair of shoes that his grandmother tells him they just can’t afford. But Jeremy sees “those shoes” everywhere—it seems that all the other boys are wearing them, and Jeremy can’t escape the message that without the black high-tops with two white stripes, he just isn’t fast enough, cool enough, or popular enough to count. “I have dreams about those shoes,” he says. He wants the shoes so much that he pays for a second-hand pair of them him, even though they pinch his toes because they are the wrong size. It is clear that Jeremy hopes that "those shoes" will make up for all the other differences between himself and the other boys, differences that he can’t control and that he knows his grandmother can’t control either. Along the way, however, Jeremy discovers that even without the shoes, he is loved and he can be happy. By the end of the story, when he has finally given the shoes away to a boy who was kind to him, he realizes that the boots his grandmother bought for him are just right for the moment. We can see that he’s starting to appreciate what his grandmother does give him, rather than worrying about what she can’t give him.

Doris in “Stray” finds a puppy in the aftermath of a huge snowstorm and wants to keep it so badly, even though she knows that “her father made so little money any pets were out of the question.” Doris pushes herself to tell her parents about it, even though she understands that her father is determined to take the dog to the pound as soon as the snow has been cleared and he can get his truck out; even when her parents ignore her, she keeps saying more about the dog and how easy it would be to keep it. Doris’s dreams, like Jeremy’s, are affected by her impossible wish: “Her dreams were full of searching and
“searching for things lost.” As readers, we are suspicious of her parents, as they seem unnecessarily harsh and uncaring. Like Doris, we feel that her parents don’t see her needs and we resent them for it. In a surprise ending, however, Doris’s father returns from the pound and has brought the puppy back with him. He was unable, he says, to leave it in such a horrible place. Doris is speechless, and she understands, as we do too, that her parents do see her needs, and that they are capable of love even if it is costly. Although the return of the dog is miraculous, this new appreciation for her parents is the true joy for Doris.

These stories end in very different ways. In each case, however, the reader can understand that the human relationships in these characters’ lives are what matter most, and that it is the strength of those relationships that we trust to bring future happiness to Jeremy and Doris, despite the harsh material conditions of their lives. We can trust that, although, as Jeremy’s grandmother says, “There’s no room for ‘want’ around here—just need,” Jeremy and Doris will get what they need, which is the love of the people around them.
Sample Essay #2:

Point-by-point Structure
- Introduction
- Subordinate claim #1 as it applies to both texts
- Subordinate claim #2 as it applies to both texts
- Conclusion

Jeremy, in the story *Those Shoes*, by Maribeth Boelts, wants a pair of sneakers that are too expensive for his grandmother to buy new. By the end of the story, Jeremy learns that he doesn't need the shoes to be happy, that there are other parts of his life that matter. In Cynthia Rylant’s moving story "Stray," Doris is a young girl who finds a puppy during a snowstorm and sets her heart on keeping him, although she knows her parents won’t hear of it. This story’s happy ending rests more on Doris’s realization that her parents really care about her than on the fact that she gets to keep the dog. *Those Shoes*, by Maribeth Boelts and "Stray" by Cynthia Rylant are both stories of longing and acceptance: Both are stories of characters who want something extraordinary, but end up appreciating what they already have.

In both stories, we are introduced to characters who desperately desire something that their families cannot afford. Jeremy sees “those shoes” everywhere—it seems that all the other boys are wearing them, and Jeremy can’t escape the message that without the black high-tops with two white stripes, he just isn’t fast enough, cool enough, or popular enough to count. “I have dreams about those shoes,” he says. He wants the shoes so much that he pays for a second-hand pair of them himself, even though they pinch his toes because they are the wrong size. Doris wants to keep the puppy she finds so badly, even though she knows that “her father made so little money any pets were out of the question.” Doris pushes herself to tell her parents about it, even though she understands that her father is determined to take the dog to the pound as soon as the snow has been cleared and he can get his truck out; even when her parents ignore her, she keeps saying more about the dog and how easy it would be to keep it. Doris’s dreams, like Jeremy’s, are affected by her impossible wish: “Her dreams were full of searching and searching for things lost.”

Both characters, however, come to terms with their searching by the end of the stories. The stories have very different outcomes for the characters: Jeremy’s wish is never fulfilled, whereas Doris’s is. Jeremy eventually decides to give his too-small shoes away to a boy who has been kind to him when others were making fun. Doris spends a terrible afternoon trying to adjust to the loss of the puppy, only to discover that evening that her father has brought the dog back home after all. In each case, the reader can understand that the human relationships in these characters’ lives are what matter most, and that it is the strength of those relationships that we trust to bring future happiness to Jeremy and Doris,
Despite the harsh material conditions of their lives. By the end of *Those Shoes*, it has snowed, and Jeremy remembers that his grandmother has bought new boots for him. “New black boots that no kid has ever worn before.” And by the end of “Stray,” the snow has cleared and Doris’s parents have changed their minds—we see a new side of Doris’s dad, who couldn’t bear to leave the dog in the cruel pound.

Reading these two stories has made me realize that although we may search outside of ourselves and our relationships for happiness, there is nothing so valuable as our connections to the people closest to us, and nothing so fulfilling as strengthening those connections. We can trust that, although, as Jeremy’s grandmother says, “There’s no room for ‘want’ around here—just need,” Jeremy and Doris will get what they need, which is the love of the people around them.