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Getting Serious about Reading in a Series: A Unit of Study

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by Diane M. Huot

Introduction

Getting Serious about Reading in a Series is a six-week unit of study for children in grades two and three. The main goals of this unit are to motivate children to read more books and to improve comprehension and performance on the Connecticut Mastery Test. Critical steps in developing comprehension are forming initial understanding, developing interpretation, and demonstrating a critical stance. Goals of reading are to construct meaning, to self-regulate learning and to entertain. The unit I am writing will improve students' performance on the Connecticut Mastery Test in reading by providing opportunities for the student to notice the predictability of the text, compare the characters and setting, notice the similarity of the structure, and make comparisons between texts.

The overview we shall take of books in a series is divided into three areas:

1. Stratemeyer Syndicate-An Early Series of Children's Books
2. Advantages of Reading Books in a Series
3. Criticisms of Reading Books in a Series

Book reviews and a unit of teaching to encourage serial reading will succeed this overview. This curriculum is designed to be flexible and to meet the needs and interests of our students.

Unit Purpose

This unit is designed to provide a background to serial writing as well as the mindset, motivation, and goals of reading serialized fictional texts. The first book in a series is like a circus barker who leads us into the funhouse. The subsequent books are the magic from which we never want to emerge. The series is the best kind of trap. Reading serial chapter books now may well point toward the adult's interest in reading mysteries that all feature the same detective or, yet more ambitiously, in reading more than one book by a single author. We shall try to discuss why this is so, and put our conclusions into practice in the classroom. By examining the thought process behind writing and reading books in a series and the interest of students in this type of reading, we shall enable students to choose books on their reading levels and open the door to a lifetime of reading enjoyment.

Academic Setting

My unit will be taught in a self-contained third grade classroom at Conte West Hills School in New Haven, Connecticut. Most of the children are eight and nine years old with an occasional ten year old. They come with a variety of home situations and differences in academic ability as well as considerable differences in general knowledge. They come from varied ethnic, economic and social backgrounds with many children not being read to at home. Lack of reading models at home and exposure to reading at a preschool age has created a large group of reluctant readers. Approximately 30% of the students are in reading remediation programs.

This unit will utilize a variety of reading series from the second through fourth grade reading levels to provide material on an appropriate level for each student.

Overview of Books in a Series

The Stratemeyer Syndicate-An Early Series of Children's Books

What most of us think of as series books began at the turn of the century. Edward Stratemeyer was a prolific writer who wrote both adult and children's books. While he was not the first author to create books with recurring characters, he was the first to create books in an open-ended series, which could continue as long as there was an interest.

Edward Stratemeyer soon found out that he had more ideas for stories and series than he could write on his own. He established a group of writers known as the Stratemeyer Syndicate in 1905. Stratemeyer laid out the basic plot, outline, and characters of each book to be written. Writers were hired through classified advertisement to "ghost" write the books. The writers were paid a flat fee of between seventy-five and one hundred fifty dollars to write the books and received no royalties.

Edward Stratemeyer was a writer, editor, and a businessman. He realized there was a large untapped market

in children's literature. He also knew that if he could create an "I want more" attitude with the reader, he could sell more books.

Some of the key practices Stratemeyer used to insure an interested audience continue to be used today. Stratemeyer published several volumes at once to gain an interest in the series. His books were written under a pseudonym, in order to insure the author would "never die". He created his books to look like adult books. The stories were written at a predictable length with chapters ending in cliffhangers to increase the readers' desire to turn the pages, and as one volume was finished, the next volume assured the same experience. Stratemeyer wanted his children's literature to educate as well as entertain. He included fascinating bits of esoteric information woven throughout the mysteries. His characters learned through their adventures by imagining various sorts of ideal circumstances for growing up, not school. They reinforced values adults believe they should pass on to their children. These books celebrated the "American Dream". Children became absorbed in the books and could fantasize about having as much independence and responsibility as the heroes have. For many children these books were their first in depth relationship outside of the family. They became familiar with the characters and were reassured by the patterned plots.

Edward Stratemeyer created over 125 series, including *The Hardy Boys*, *Bobbsey Twins*, and *Nancy Drew*. He wrote over 160 books and provided plot, outlines and characters for over 800 more.

Advantages of Reading Books in a Series

Beginning readers must develop the pleasure of reading to become committed lifelong readers. Books in a series can help to promote lifelong reading. Spending many hours reading the same series allows children to practice and become confident readers. The familiar makes reading less taxing and creates a feeling of success. The better the novice reader is at a skill the more pleasure he/she is likely to derive from it. "Children who read a lot by choice are more likely to succeed in school than those who dislike reading" (*Instructor Magazine*, May-June 2003). Once a child falls in love with a series he/she realizes these books come with a guarantee of pleasure. When two or more children enjoy the same series, this creates social connections among readers who enjoy, discuss and interpret these books.

Young readers learn to be better readers not through exercises and tests but through "free" reading. Children who read voluntarily find it personally rewarding. They continually come across words they already know and learn to skim, surmise, and conclude. This is accomplished when children get "hooked" on a series. Children find that reading books in a series minimizes the risks of reading. When children haven't developed a reading preference a library can seem overwhelming; but once they know how to look up and find their favorite series, finding other resources becomes easier. Knowing that there are familiar characters with a predictable plot makes series reading valuable and an easy choice.

Arguably the child best served by reading in a series is the reluctant reader. When a reluctant reader becomes connected to a series it builds confidence and helps the individual become a member of a community of readers. Reading in a series provides a lot of scaffolding to build support. Reluctant readers are also served by the repetition of words and the predictability of the texts. Young readers learn how to sort significant details from less significant ones and how to anticipate what may or should happen. The consistency of characters and the highly patterned plots provide reassurance and familiarity, thus minimizing the risks and disappointments of reading that is too challenging.

Criticisms of Reading Books in a Series

Books in a series have been criticized for being sub-literary, formulaic, and lacking in diversity. From my reading of different series I can see some truth in this charge. Not all “ghost” writers have the same level of writing skill. However, one author, who keeps the integrity of the writing level, does write many of today’s series. However, the very fact that serial books are formulaic is exactly what makes the novice reader like them. They are predictable but they are also success stories with happy endings, which grab the imagination of children struggling through their own obstacles. The characters are strong and self-assured. These stories motivate children to read and help them to develop a love of reading as well as practice the skills needed for more difficult reading later on.

My greater concern with books in a series has to do with diversity. There is a lack of culturally diverse books. Updated series contain side characters and an occasional hero who happens to be African American, Latino, Asian American, Middle Eastern American, and/or Native American, but it would be nice to see more of this.

Series Books for the Second and Third Grade Classroom

There are many series books for the second and third grade level. I have reviewed 10 of these and will provide a brief overview of each. The reviews are organized by reading difficulty, from least difficult to most.

Henry and Mudge by Cynthia Rylant

This is an easy to read series featuring Henry, a young boy of about six or seven years old and his lovable 160-pound dog Mudge. The stories have a simple sequence of events and are written from a third person’s point of view. The narrator of the stories is an outsider who can report only what he or she sees and hears. The narrator can tell us what is happening, but he can’t tell us the thoughts of the characters. The series contains short chapters of five to ten pages with each page having colorful illustrations taking up half the page. These stories are easily understandable and promote friendship, love, and family.

Mr. Putter and Tabby by Cynthia Rylant

In the first book in this series, *Mr. Putter and Tabby Pour the Tea*, Mr. Putter is a lonely old man who is partially deaf, looking for someone to share his life with. Mr. Putter doesn’t want a kitten because they’re too peppy and Mr. Putter isn’t peppy anymore. He goes to the animal shelter and finds Tabby, an old, yellow cat that is partially deaf. Mr. Putter and Tabby eat breakfast together; then have tea together. Mr. Putter reads Tabby stories in the evening. It seems as though they’ve always been together.

Mr. Putter catches a cold and feels miserable in another installment in the series, *Mr. Putter and Tabby Catch a Cold*. Two new characters are introduced, Mrs. Teaberry, a neighbor who calls and hears Mr. Putter is sick, and her dog Zeke. Mr. Putter doesn’t want Mrs. Teaberry to catch his cold so Mrs. Teaberry sends her dog Zeke. Mr. Putter is apprehensive about Zeke coming over because of Tabby. Zeke arrives with a thermos of soup strapped to his back. Mrs. Teaberry later sends Zeke over with a thermos of peppermint tea. Mr. Putter asks to borrow a book and Mrs. Teaberry tells him the book belongs to Zeke. Zeke arrives with the book strapped to his back. Mr. Putter gets into bed with Tabby and Zeke and they read stories all day long. Life is good.

Mr. Putter and Tabby is an easy to read series with short chapters and colorful pictures on each page. The story is told from a third person's perspective in simple, repetitive vocabulary. The themes of friendship and sharing are prevalent in these stories.

Horrible Harry by Suzy Kline

Harry is a second grader who is one step away from trouble. He delights in planning adventures with his best friend Doug. The stories take place in a school setting, which has great appeal for young children. The pace of the story is fast with the reader wondering, "How will Harry get out of this mess now?"

In the book *Horrible Harry and the Dungeon*, Harry gets himself sent to the "dungeon" for a crime he didn't commit to check out the new school suspension room supervisor. You can't help but continue reading to find out what happens. Harry's best friend Doug is the narrator, who reveals his personal thoughts and feelings about what is happening to Harry.

It's Secret Pal Week at school in the book *Horrible Harry and the Green Slime*. Harry is thrilled to pull Song Lee's name from the jar and gets angry with Doug for not sharing the name of his secret pal. Harry is horrible to Doug all week. Every time Harry gets a note or small gift from his secret pal he brags to Doug that his secret pal truly knows what a friend is. By the end of the week Harry learns that Doug was his secret pal and apologizes to Doug in his awkward way.

This is one of the few series I've found to have some diversity of character. A secondary character in this story is Song Lee an Asian American who also attends English as a Second Language class during the school day. The *Horrible Harry* series is funny and makes every day in second grade a surprise.

Junie B. Jones by Barbara Parks

Junie B. Jones is an irrepressible almost six year old. She always says just what's on her mind, though it sometimes gets her into trouble. Young readers love her imaginative schemes. The story is told from Junie B's point of view revealing all her personal thoughts and feelings. Junie B. takes many things literally and this triggers much of the conflict in her day-to-day life. Junie B. herself can only resolve this internal conflict. All of the books begin with Junie B. introducing herself as Junie B. Jones and saying the B stands for Beatrice but she doesn't like Beatrice, she just likes B.

Junie B. is scared of the school bus and the mean kids on the bus on her first day of kindergarten in *Junie B. Jones and the Stupid Smelly Bus*. Junie B. has an awful experience on her way to school. She finds that the bus is very big, has a funny door, makes a screechy sound and smells of egg salad. She has problems with the boy sitting next to her and finds the kids on the bus mean and loud. She encounters many new and inhibiting things on the first day, decides not to follow the kids to the bus at the end of the day and stays in the classroom by herself. She explores the nurse's office and the school library, and runs through the hallways and the cafeteria. By now the police and the firefighters have been called, the principal and teacher are worried and her mother has arrived. All of a sudden the custodian notices her trying to get into the locked bathroom. Everyone starts to talk at once, the police and firefighters leave and Junie B. is left having to explain herself. Her mother hugs her very tight, talks to her about safety and school rules and makes sure she has a friend to sit with on the bus.

In *Junie B. Jones Has a Monster Under Her Bed*, Junie B. is convinced that a monster exists. Her mom, dad, and grandma all try to convince and pacify her with tricks to get her to forget about the monster, but not until

Junie B. herself puts her own scary picture under her bed to scare the monster does she feel safe. Her problem is solved.

Children can identify with Junie B. Jones because she is going through many of the same experiences they have had in school: separation anxiety, making new friends and learning new rules and routines. What makes Junie B. Jones appealing is the way she uses the same language (not always grammatical) as the everyday child. The chapters are short and easy to read, with black and white illustrations every three or four pages.

Marvin Redpost by Louis Sachar

Marvin Redpost is a third grade boy filled with all the anxiety and fears of any child. He is encouraged and supported by his parents, his older brother Jacob-whom Marvin admires-and his younger sister Linzy who loves Marvin very much. His best friends, Stuart and Nick, get Marvin into troublesome predicaments, and Clarence, a classmate, is always there to make Marvin feel worse.

The first book in the series is *Marvin Redpost Kidnapped at Birth?* Marvin has red hair and blue eyes and everyone else in his family has brown hair and brown eyes. Marvin convinces himself that he is the lost son of the King of Shamboon, Prince Robert. His friends Stuart and Nick brag to everyone that Marvin has royal blood and they even persuade Clarence that Marvin is a prince. Marvin asks his parents if he's been adopted, realizes his parents cannot be baby robbers, and tries to convince them he was switched at birth. Mrs. Redpost tells Marvin in her calm manner that it all sounds very logical and supports Marvin in his quest to find out. His mother takes him to have his blood tested at the Watergate Hotel and Marvin realizes he is the 812th boy there thinking he is Prince Robert. The receptionist tells Marvin his chances are one in a million that he is the missing prince. After the initial blood test is a match and Marvin is given a slip of paper to have a longer, blood test, Marvin puts the slip of paper in his pocket and returns to the waiting room where he finds his family. He decides that after all the odds of being Prince Robert are one in a million, and not worth pursuing after all.

In *Marvin Redpost Super Fast Out of Control!* Marvin has just received the bike he's been begging for. Now that he has it, he is afraid to ride it because it has gears, hand breaks, and is big. His friends Stuart and Nick brag to everyone that Marvin will be riding down Suicide Hill and Clarence is calling Marvin a chicken to antagonize him. Marvin is afraid to ride and looks to his parents for an excuse to get out of the problem. His parents however, want him to make his own decision. Marvin deals with this inner conflict and has to make a choice. What would his friends think? He decides to try and his parents are there to support him. Everyone else has forgotten about Suicide Hill and Marvin realizes he is the only one who truly cares about whether or not he does ride down the hill. Marvin does complete the ride down Suicide Hill and his family is there to cheer him on.

The *Marvin Redpost* series are hilarious stories of a loving, supportive family and the day-to-day conflicts children encounter in the world. The chapters are short with two or three black and white illustrations per chapter. The stories are fast-paced and witty, with lots of attention to detail. These stories should capture the reluctant reader because they are funny and sometimes gross.

The Magic Tree House by Mary Pope Osborne

Eight year-old Jack and seven year old Annie are brother and sister from Frog Creek, Pennsylvania. They discover a magical tree house filled with all sorts of books. The books have the power to transport them to any place in history or in the future. To go someplace they need to turn the page of a book and make a wish.

In *The Magic Tree House: Pirates Past Noon #4*, Jack and Annie are sent back in time 300 years to a deserted island with a parrot and the Pirates of the Caribbean. The pirates hold them captive; even though the only gold the children have is a special gold medallion with an “M” marked on it that they found in a previous *Magic Tree House* story. Capt’n Bones has a map to Captain Kidd’s treasure but Capt’n Bones can’t read. The children assist by reading the map and finding the treasure buried under a big, black rock. A storm is coming and the parrot tells the children it’s time to go. They grab the medallion and then the rope ladder and climb up to the tree house. Their Pennsylvania book is quickly opened to a map of Frog Creek, the wind starts to blow, the tree house starts to spin and Jack and Annie soon find themselves at home. When they open their eyes there is a beautiful old woman with a green-feathered cape in the place where the parrot was. The woman is Morgan le Fay, King Arthur’s sister from Camelot. She is both a librarian and an enchantress who has come to the 20th Century to collect books. The children soon discover that the “M” in the medallion stands for her. Morgan tells Jack and Annie about the spell she has put on the tree house and that the magic works for them because of Annie’s belief in magic and the children’s love of books. Morgan le Fay is the reason the children have been able to go on all the adventures.

In *The Magic Tree House: Tonight on the Titanic #17* Jack and Annie arrive at the tree house on a stormy night to find a little dog that is under a spell. A note from Morgan is attached to the dog saying the children must be given four gifts from the following to break the spell: a ship lost at sea, the prairie blue, a forest far away, and a kangaroo. They name the dog Teddy. Jack and Annie are transported back to April 14, 1912 and find themselves on the Titanic. Jack wants to go back but Annie feels they have plenty of time to explore. They meet Lucy and William O’Malley, who are on their way to New York to meet their parents. Jack and Annie tell the O’Malleys that the ship is sinking and they all run to look for lifeboats. The water is beginning to creep in and cover their shoes. When William and Lucy get into the lifeboat they want Jack and Annie to follow but they won’t. Lucy, grateful for their help reaches into her pocket and gives Annie a silver watch on a chain. Then a man picks up Annie and puts her in a lifeboat. There is nothing Jack can do. A woman named Lady Blackwell nearly throws herself over the side of the ship. Jack grabs Annie’s hand and pulls her out. They run to the Tree House but it is gone. The Titanic sinks deeper and deeper. The lights go out. Annie wishes she could go home, pointing to Pennsylvania in the book. All of a sudden, the wind starts to blow and the tree house starts to spin. Jack and Annie are lying on the floor. They think about the Titanic and start to cry. Teddy licks their tears. Annie finds Lucy’s gift in her pocket. The watch has stopped at 2:20, exactly when the ship went down. They realize they have the first gift to break Teddy’s spell: the gift from the ship lost at sea.

The *Magic Tree House* series is written in sets of four with a single mystery threaded through all four books. Annie and Jack are brave, problem-solving main characters. The chapters are short with a few black and white illustrations throughout the book. These stories enable children to travel around the world and through time with literature. Non Fiction Research Guides accompany many of the books and provide photos, illustrations and information about the times, places and cultures visited by Jack and Annie. These adventures are great for the history buff.

Amber Brown by Paula Danziger

The *Amber Brown* series explores contemporary childhood through the eyes of a nine-year-old girl of a divorced family. Amber repeatedly refers to herself as “I, Amber Brown” in the stories to remind herself that she belongs to herself, not her mom or dad or teacher. In *Amber Brown Wants Extra Credit* she is learning to live with a divorced mother who is starting to date although Amber dreams of her parents getting back together. Amber doesn’t want to meet her mother’s boyfriend Max because she feels she is being disloyal to her dad who lives in Paris. She later finds out that her dad is also dating and realizes that this is life and she

needs to cope with the changes.

In *I, Amber Brown*, Amber's dad has returned from Paris and Amber must now live in two houses since her parents have joint custody. Her mother is now engaged to Max. Amber learns to play her parents against each other by having her dad bring her to have her ears pierced even though she knows her mother wants her to wait until she is twelve. The family learns new rules of communication, and Amber states, "There should be a rule book for kids of divorced parents with every little thing listed that we have to remember."

The stories take a humorous, light-hearted approach to Amber's struggles and conflicts. Amber loves to make puns and questions the meaning of similes like "neat as a pin" how messy can the head of a pin get? She is a fourth grader who is having difficulty balancing the changes in her home life and keeping up her grades at school. These stories are typical of what many children are dealing with at this age and this keeps the reader engaged, wondering how Amber will deal with the changes. The chapters are short, with two or three black and white illustrations in each chapter. The *Amber Brown* series is easy to get hooked on.

Geronimo Stilton translated by Edizione Piemme

Geronimo the mouse is a brainy newspaper editor and amateur detective. He is constantly getting dragged into adventures, which become stories for his paper, the Rodent's Gazette. His sister and special correspondent Thea, his jokester cousin Trap, and his loving and supportive favorite nephew Benjamin aid him. He is a reluctant sleuth and a true gentlemouse. Cousin Trap is always a point of conflict, with his constant tricks and teasing of Geronimo. The author uses hints and clues to suggest what will happen later in the story and the conflict keeps sympathetic point of view focused on Geronimo. The stories take place on Mouse Island, featuring various cities such as New Mouse City and San Mouscisco.

In *Geronimo Stilton: I'm Too Fond of My Fur!* Geronimo is called by his friend Professor von Volt to help him. Professor von Volt mentions something about a yeti before they are cut off. Geronimo isn't much for traveling halfway around the world nor is he much of a sportsmouse, so he enlists the help of his sister Thea. She decides that a story about a real yeti would be big news. They will be climbing Mouse Everest. His cousin Trap and nephew Benjamin join them on their adventure.

In *Geronimo Stilton: The Cat in the Mouse in a Haunted House*, Geronimo is stranded in Cannycat Castle. Inside the castle he sees a painting of the leaders from the great battle of Raterloo in 1754 and portraits of Prince Bigpaw Cannycat and Duke Slice paw Cannycata. He hears horrifying meowing and then classical music by that famous composer Ratwig von Beethoven. All of a sudden his cell phone rings. Holy cheese, he is scared! His fur is standing on end! He picks up the phone and it's his sister Thea who remains calm as he stammers with fear. At first, Thea thinks he's making a mountain out of a mousehill but then she realizes this place could have a great ghost scoop. She'll take pictures and the paper will sell like hot cheesecakes. She hangs up the phone, picks up her cousin Trap and nephew Benjamin and they head off to find Geronimo and another adventure.

The book provides a map of the island and a listing with pictures of all of the staff at the Rodent's Gazette. The author uses different font styles, colors, and sizes to elaborate a point, emphasize sound or action and picture a scene. He uses puns and subtle satire to appeal to adults also. The story is told from Geronimo's point of view, revealing his thoughts and feelings. This is new to the American market and is translated from Italian.

The Adventures of Captain Underpants by Dav Pilkey

This is the story of two fourth grade boys named George and Harold. They are two pranksters who like to have fun and get themselves in and out of trouble. They are also the writers and illustrators of their own comic book series called *Captain Underpants* .

The Adventures of Captain Underpants series is a combination of individual adventures starring “the principal” Captain Underpants and the short comic books written by George and Harold.

In *The Adventures of Captain Underpants: The First Epic Novel* , George and Harold get busted for a prank and Mr. Krupp, the principal blackmails the boys with a list of demands. Mr. Krupp dislikes George and Harold and especially dislikes their comic books. George and Harold accept the deal at first but soon get tired of doing everything Mr. Krupp says and decide to hypnotize him. When Mr. Krupp is in a trance the boys snap their fingers and turn him into the superhero Captain Underpants, and thus the series is created. With his superhero powers Mr. Krupp/Captain Underpants flies around the city giving wedgies to all the bad guys. What better way to inspire a beginning or reluctant reader to read than by making fun of the school principal!

In *The Adventures of Captain Underpants and the Perilous Plot of Professor Poopypants: The Fourth Epic Novel* , Poor Professor Pippy Poopypants had been laughed out of the scientific community because of his name and decides to get a job as an elementary school teacher. He soon realizes that he isn’t getting any more respect in the classroom and decides to invent something that will pull the rest of the planet down with him. He invents a machine that would change everyone’s normal name to a silly name. Fluffy Toiletnose and Cheeseball Wafflefanny (George and Harold) decide something has to be done so they run to the principal’s office, snap their fingers and Mr. Pottybiscuits (Mr. Krupp) turns into Captain Underpants! Needless to say, Captain Underpants saves the day. Professor Poopypants apologizes and decides to change his name to his grandfather’s name so nobody will make fun of him again. He changes his name to Tippy Tinkletrousers.

When I first looked at this series I was turned off by the rude language and the deliberate misspelling but after reading three of the books in the series I was ready to get past the rudeness and see the appeal to the reluctant reader. The story is told from a third person’s perspective. The conflict occurs when George and Harold plan some sort of scheme that goes wrong. This is the first series I’ve encountered that has multi-cultural main characters. George is African-American and Harold is Caucasian. The stories are fast-paced, with pictures on every page. The use of alliteration makes the series even funnier. There is also a gimmick called a Flip-O-Rama in every book which features techniques that let you animate the action. *The Adventures of Captain Underpants* is a hilarious series.

A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket

A Series of Unfortunate Events is a world built by imagination and bad luck. The main characters are the three Baudelaire children, Violet, a 14-year-old inventor, Klaus, a 12-year-old avid reader with a great memory for details, and Sunny, an infant who likes to bite. They are orphaned after their parents are killed in a fire at their mansion. They face adversity when sent to live with a distant cousin, the rude and treacherous Count Olaf who is only interested in getting his hands on their fortune. Count Olaf is assisted by an assortment of accomplices who back up his plans to get “the orphans”, (as he refers to them) fortune. These corrupt characters include a hook-handed man, two women with white faces, a bald man, and an enormous creature that looks like neither a man nor woman.

In the first book, *A Series of Unfortunate Events: A Bad Beginning* , the evil Count Olaf takes the children into his dirty, dilapidated home making them do all the chores. He makes them cook for and serve his perverse comrades, and deprives them of any comforts or happiness. He plots to marry Violet in order to control the

Baudelaire fortune by staging a play with a marriage ceremony written by Al Funcoot. The marriage is foiled when Klaus borrows a book about nuptial law and learns Violet must sign the marriage contract in her own hand. Violet tricks the Count by signing the document with her left hand instead of her right, which makes the marriage illegal.

In the eighth book, *A Series of Unfortunate Events: The Hostile Hospital* the children have escaped from Count Olaf and are now charged with his murder. They are on the run and are hiding in the closed ward of the Heimlich Hospital. They are volunteering in the Library of Records and doing research trying to find evidence about the fire that killed their parents. They discover a Baudelaire file with only one page inside. It contains a photograph of Jacques Snicket, one of Jerome and Esme Squalor, and one of a man holding a notebook and pen with his back turned away from the camera. Having only read the first and eighth installments of the series, I don't know these characters, who are from a previous book, so I see some need in reading the series in order. I notice, however, that Jacques has the same last name as our author and wonder if this is some sort of clue. The children seem to think that this may be a clue that one parent may still be alive. Count Olaf tracks "the orphans" down and disguises himself as the Head of Human Resources. He has Violet kidnapped by his goons and has scheduled her for the first craniectomy under the name Laura V. Bleediotie, an anagram for Violet Baudelaire. Count Olaf uses anagrams when he wants to hide something. Notice the author of the play, Al Funcoot is Count Olaf. Klaus and Sunny disguise themselves as doctors and go into the Operating Theater. All of a sudden a fire has started in the Hall of Records and this enables the Baudelaire children to escape. The children hide in Count Olaf's car trunk hoping to find more clues, when Count Olaf and his band of criminals jump into the car and speed off to the next part of the journey, book nine.

The author Lemony Snicket is a pseudonym for David Handler. These mysterious and humorous books have longer chapters and are written for the advanced reader. The books are cleverly titled using alliteration. Witty alliterations and anagrams are sprinkled throughout the texts. The stories are filled with irony that also appeals to the adult reader. Nine books have been published so far with a plan for four more. This series is being made into a movie with Jim Carey as Count Olaf to be released at the end of this year.

The Unit

The structure of the unit will consist of studying the set-up of the book and the set-up of the series, finding what information/idea is constant and growing throughout the series, and using one series to help read another. The unit will begin with the whole class studying one series with the teacher modeling the strategies and skills through mini-lessons. In the second phase of the unit the students will be paired by similar reading abilities and will choose a series, read three books from the chosen series and evaluate using the skills and strategies learned during the mini-lessons to create "Why You Should Read This Series" recommendations.

The series to be studied will range from second to fourth grade reading levels using Developmental Reading Assessments (DRA levels 18-44). Reading books in a series will help make book choices easier for students. Students will get to know the characters better thus becoming more invested in reading. This will help struggling readers carry information from one book to the next. Students will also have ideas about their reading and test them out across the text in the series.

This 6-week unit is comprised of 9 mini-lessons of approximately 20 minutes each and paired reading.

During the first three-weeks the whole class will study three books in one series read aloud by the teacher. The teacher will use the Think-Aloud Strategy to model orally what good readers think about and how they make meaning from what has been read. This will help students make predictions about the text; compare and contrast events, ideas, and characters; visualize the information that is described in the text; and make connections. The series used for teacher modeling is *Henry and Mudge* by Cynthia Rylant. This series was chosen because of its transitional reading level.

In the second phase of the unit the students will be paired by similar reading abilities and will choose a series. For the next three weeks the partners will read and analyze these three books using the skills and strategies modeled in the mini-lessons.

Objectives

The following objectives from the Connecticut Mastery Test will be covered during this unit.

Forming Initial Understanding

The student will be able to:

Determine the theme within the written work.

Identify or infer important characters, settings, problems, events, relationships and details of a written work.

Developing an Interpretation

The student will be able to:

Make connections between the texts in the series.

Identify or infer the author's use of structure/organizational patterns.

Draw conclusions about the author's purpose in including or omitting specific details in a written work.

Use evidence from the text to draw and/or support a conclusion.

Demonstrate a Critical Stance

The student will be able to:

Use information from the text to make a prediction based on what is read.

Analyze the author's craft.

Evaluate explicit and implicit information and themes within a series.

Materials

Henry and Mudge: The First Book by Cynthia Rylant (Week One)

Henry and Mudge: The Best Day of All by Cythis Rylant (Week Two)

Henry and Mudge: The Starry Night by Cynthia Rylant (Week Three)

Chart Paper

Marker

Post-It Notes

Reading Series on a variety of reading levels

Mini-lessons Week One: Studying the Set-Up of a Book in a Series.

Day One

1. Introduce the concept of series books to the class.
2. Preview the book and make predictions.
3. Read aloud *Henry and Mudge: The First Book* pages 1 to 17.

Synopsis: Henry has no brothers or sisters. He lives in a neighborhood with no other children. Henry is lonely. He asks his parents for a dog and when they agree, he searches for just the dog he wants and finds Mudge. They become best friends.

4. Discuss the characters and think about their relationship.

Think-Aloud,

“I think Henry is a boy about six or seven years old because he’s old enough to walk to school by himself yet worries about the bigger kids. He seems more confident and happy with Mudge and I don’t think he’s lonely anymore.”

6. Make two columns on chart paper listing the two main characters and their characteristics below.

Day Two

1. Read aloud *Henry and Mudge: The First Book* pages 18-27.

Synopsis: Mudge loves everything about Henry’s room, the smell of his dirty socks, the feel of his stuffed animals, watching the fish in his fish tank, and most of all his bed. Henry loves having Mudge walk him to school and he feels safe and happy. One day Mudge takes a walk without Henry and gets lost. He misses Henry. Then he lies down and falls asleep.

2. Discuss the setting of the book and how it impacts the story.

Think-Aloud,

“I think Mudge got lost because he got distracted by his new surroundings and lost his way. I wonder what Henry will do.”

3. Using chart paper, describe the setting.

Day Three

1. Finish reading *Henry and Mudge: The First Book* pages 28 to 39.

Synopsis: Henry thought Mudge had run away. He was very upset but realized after an hour that Mudge must be lost. Henry walked, called, and looked everywhere for Mudge.

He called one last time and Henry woke from his lonely sleep and came running. Mudge never went for a walk alone again and Henry never worried that Mudge would leave.

2. Study the structure of the book, think about the impact of time and how this affects the story.

Think-Aloud,

“I notice that this book is divided into chapters alternating between Henry and Mudge. The first two chapters described Henry and then Mudge and how they came to be together. The middle chapters seem to focus on Mudge’s comfort with Henry and his new home. This causes Mudge to go out and explore on his own which creates the problem (plot) of the story. Mudge gets lost and both Henry and Mudge are lonely and scared. I notice that the problem is resolved when Henry finds Mudge. I notice that Henry and Mudge have walked to school together more than once and they have developed a strong friendship. This makes me think that the story takes place over a few days. The last chapter makes me think that Henry and Mudge will always be together and that they will never forget the day Mudge got lost.”

3. Using chart paper, outline the elements of the story: character, setting, plot, and resolution.

Mini-Lessons Week Two: Studying the Set-Up of a Series.

Day Four

1. Preview the book and make predictions.

Ask the students, “What might be some of the expectations in this new book about Henry and Mudge?”

2. Read aloud *Henry and Mudge: The Best Day of All* pages 1-18.

Synopsis: It was Henry’s birthday and he was excited. He tried to wake his dog Mudge but he rolled over and continued to snore. Mudge finally woke up when Henry told him about having cake, ice cream and crackers. Mudge loved crackers. Henry’s house was decorated with balloons. His father took lots of pictures with his camera and his mother made a special pancake breakfast.

3. Think about the way the characters are acting and if they are acting in ways that are predictable. Think about any new characters that are introduced and how they impact the story.

Think-Aloud,

“Mudge is still sleeping on Henry’s bed which leads me to think they are still best friends. I notice that Henry’s mother and father have a bigger role in this story. I can tell they really want their son’s birthday to be special by the way they’ve decorated the house, taken lots of pictures and made a special breakfast.”

4. Add any new characteristics to the Henry and Mudge chart from Day One.

Day Five

1. Finish reading aloud *Henry and Mudge: The Best Day of All* pages 19-40.

Synopsis: Henry invited his friends to his birthday party. His mother and father had fixed all sorts of games for the back yard. A big pi-ata was hanging from a tree. Henry’s father fixed a blindfold over Henry’s eyes and Henry started to swing at the pi-ata with a stick. On the fourth swing the pi-ata cracked open and out fell candy, gum and little crackers. Everyone was happy and Mudge was the happiest of all. He loved crackers! They had cake and ice cream after the games. Henry received lots of presents including a box of dog treats. When the party was over, Henry, his parents and Mudge rested in the backyard dreaming about birthday wishes on the best day of all.

2. Notice if the setting or movement of time changes inside the series and how it affects the characters in the story.

Think-Aloud,

“This book is also a chapter book. However, it only has four chapters. I can tell by the title that the story takes place over one day, Henry’s birthday. I noticed that the first two chapters focus on the early part of the day when Henry and his parents are getting ready for the party. I can tell that the major event (plot) of this story is the birthday party because everyone has spent so much time preparing for it. The story ends with the family resting in the backyard after the party reflecting on the best day of all.”

3. Using chart paper, outline the elements of the story: character, setting, plot, and resolution.

Day Six

1. Prepare a large Venn Diagram (two intersecting circles) on chart paper. Title the chart *Henry and Mudge*. Label one circle *The First Book* and the second circle *The Best Day of All*

2. Review and reread *Henry and Mudge: The First Book* and *Henry and Mudge: The Best Day of All* by Cynthia

Rylant. While reading list ways in which the two books are the same in the intersection and different in each their respective circles.

Think-Aloud,

“I notice that Henry and Mudge care a lot about each other in both books. Mudge sleeps on Henry’s bed. Both stories end with Henry and Mudge resting together. In *The First Book* I can see the author spent some time introducing the reader to each character and letting us know how and why they met. In the second book, *The Best Day of All*, I noticed that Mudge is truly an important member of the family, as even Mudge gets a special present of dog treat on Henry’s birthday. He enjoys spending time with all the family. We get to know how much Henry’s mother and father love him. I think if I hadn’t read *The First Book* I still would have liked the second even though I wouldn’t have known how they got together.”

3. Complete the Venn Diagram with the students.

Mini-Lessons Week Three: Common Ideas Throughout the Series

Day Seven

1. Develop a hunch across the books and find evidence to support it.

Ask the students, “What might be some of the expectations in this book now that we’ve read two Henry and Mudge books?”

2. On chart paper, list the students’ hunches.

3. Read aloud *Henry and Mudge: The Starry Night* pages 1-16.

Synopsis: Henry and Mudge always went camping in August with Henry’s parents. His mother knew all about camping. His father could play the guitar and sing but knew nothing about camping. Henry told Mudge all about the animals they would see.

4. Think about the characters and how they act across the series.

Think-Aloud,

“I can see from the first chapter that Henry, Mudge and his parents are a very close-knit family. They seem to like to do things together and camping will certainly be a very close experience. I’m surprised Henry’s father doesn’t know much about camping since they go every year. They are happy in each others’ company.”

5. Add any new characteristics to the Henry and Mudge chart from Day One.

Day Eight

1. Read aloud *Henry and Mudge: The Starry Night* pages 17-31.

Synopsis: Henry and his family all drove to Big Bear Lake and hiked with backpacks on. Mudge’s backpack was

filled with crackers. Henry saw fish, a doe and her fawn, and waterfalls. Mudge didn't see much of anything. He smelled raccoon, deer and Henry's oatmeal cookie. Henry gave Mudge the cookie from his pocket. Henry's parents set up the tent and unpacked all the gear. Henry's father took out his guitar to sing and Henry looked at Mudge and groaned.

2. Think about the series through conversations. Ask, "What ideas do you have about Henry's family?"

Think-Aloud,

" I notice that Mudge is still enjoying crackers. I bet that's his favorite treat. The family really likes to be together. They spent lots of time planning the birthday party and now they are camping together."

3. List any evidence that confirms hunches from the last lesson on the chart.

Day Nine

1. Finish reading aloud *Henry and Mudge: The Starry Night* pages 31-40.

Synopsis: Henry and his parents were looking up at the stars in the sky. Mudge wasn't looking at the stars; he was chewing on log. Mudge loved camping. After Henry's father sang one more song they all went inside the tent to sleep. Henry's parents snuggled, Henry and Mudge snuggled, and everyone slept safe and sound.

2. List any evidence that confirms hunches from the lesson two days ago on the chart.

Ask the students, "What is the Big Idea that has been carried throughout all the books?"

The Big Idea: Henry and Mudge books are stories about the friendship between a boy and his dog and the love of his family.

Weeks Four to Six

Having analyzed three books in the *Henry and Mudge* series, the students will have gained some independence while reading. The partners will use the information learned to help read another series of their choosing.

Over the next three weeks the partners will read one book a week (two copies of the same book will be provided) in their selected series. Students will plan the work they will be doing by deciding how many chapters they will read per day and use the Think- Aloud/To Themselves Strategy to analyze the text and find what information/idea is constant and growing throughout the series. The partners will be provided various ways for engagement. Their interactions may include: keeping a personal response log, writing response notes between the two partners, and discussion of very specific questions. Students will be able to show their thinking by using Post-It notes, charting and Venn Diagrams to share with others.

The unit will culminate with the students filling out a 5x7 inch index card titled: "Why You Should Read This Series" with their recommendations. It will include:

Title

Author

Main Characters

Other Characters

Setting

Big Idea

Recommendations

Leveled Reading Series

To help students become successful readers, they need to be matched with the right books. New Haven Public Schools uses the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) to guide reading. The following is a correlation of grade level to reading level and a list of books in a series.

Grade 2: DRA Levels 18-28

Grade 3: DRA Levels 30-38

Grade 4: DRA Levels 40-44

Henry and Mudge by Cynthia Rylant (18)

Mr. Potter and Tabby by Cynthia Rylant (18)

Poppleton by Cynthia Rylant (18)

Curious George by H.A. Rey (18-20)

Fox and Friends by James Marshall (18-20)

Frog and Toad by Arnold Lobel (18-20)

Franklin by Paulette Bourgeois & Brenda Clark (18-20)

Arthur by Marc Brown (20)

Clifford by Norman Bridwell (20)

Triplet Trouble by Debbie Dadey & Marcia Jones (24)

Amelia Bedelia by Peggy Parish (24-28)

Cam Jansen by David A. Adler (24-28)

Horrible Harry by Suzy Kline (24-28)

Junie B. Jones by Barbara Park (24-28)

Magic Tree House by Mary Pope Osborne (24-28)

Marvin Redpost by Louis Sachar (24-28)

Miss Nelson by Harry Allard (24-28)

The Littles by John Peterson (28)

A to Z Mysteries by Ron Roy (30)

Abracadabra a Reading Unlimited Series (30)

Amber Brown by Paula Danziger (30)

Judy Moody by Megan McDonald (30)

Angel Park by Dean Hughes (34)

Boxcar Children by Gertrude Chandler Warner (34)

Geronimo Stilton translated by Edizioni Piemme (34)

Henry Huggins by Beverly Cleary (34)

Ramona Quimby by Beverly Cleary (34)

The Adventures of Captain Underpants by Dav Pilkey (34)

Encyclopedia Brown by Donald and Rose Sobol (34-38)

Magic School Bus by Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen (34-34)

Animal Ark by Ben M. Baglio (40)

Little House by Laura Ingalls Wilder (40)

A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket (44)

Harry Potter by J.K. Rowling (44)

Narnia by C.S. Lewis (44)

Connecticut Standards for Reading Achievement Correlation to Unit

Standard 1: Reading and Responding

- 1.1 Describe the text by giving an initial reaction to the text and describing its general content and purpose.
- 1.2 Interpret the text by using prior knowledge and experiences.
- 1.3 Reflect on the text to make judgments about its meaning and quality.
- 1.5 Generate questions before, during and after reading, writing, listening and viewing.
- 1.6 Make and confirm or revise predictions.
- 1.14 Interact with others in creating, interpreting and evaluating texts.

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