

Unit Five – Interpretation Text Sets

February (Level 3 Reading Benchmark: U)

We could not agree more with the Common Core State Standards' recommendation that we teach readers at this level to determine central ideas or themes of a text as well as analyze the development of these themes (RL 5.2). By now, your students have done some work to interpret texts. They have interpreted the motivations for characters' actions and feelings, they have constructed theories about events, places, and people in their novels, and they have interpreted their own lives to construct memoirs and interpretive essays. In this unit, you'll help your readers to draw upon, transfer, and apply all of this past learning and further sharpen their analytical skills as you teach them that the stories they are reading are also about ideas. You'll move your students to think and talk about the ideas their chapter books suggest. Then you'll show them, pretty much immediately, that good books are about more than one idea, and you'll teach them to keep more than one idea afloat in their minds. You'll teach your readers that just as their books are about more than one idea, ideas live in more than one text—we call those ideas themes. Once your students are recognizing themes, you'll teach them to compare how themes are developed in different texts. All the time, you will be training your students to be analytical and persuasive as you teach them to back up their ideas with evidence from the texts (RL 5.1). You'll have them hone their reading and the ideas they are growing as they read to be more nuanced, deliberate, and finely calibrated.

This year we have envisioned Interpretation Text Sets as a book club unit, for many reasons. Giving students the opportunity to do close and critical reading across texts in the company of others will enable them to grow stronger as readers. Students will have the opportunity to harness all of the teaching you've done up to this point in the year and can work together to transfer and apply all they have learned about comprehending, synthesizing, analyzing, and interpreting across genres. In addition, book clubs offer students the chance to work within structures which inherently hold them accountable for supporting their thinking. "What part in the text makes you think that?" one club member might ask another and the club together will proceed in hashing out whether or not an interpretation is supported by the text.

Then too, working in clubs will help your fifth graders to continue to work toward meeting speaking and listening standards. It is important to note that in fourth grade, students were expected to "review the key ideas expressed and explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion" (SL 4.1). Now, you can expect children to also "draw conclusions in light of information and knowledge gained from the discussions" (SL 5.1). At this level the Common Core expects children to use their conversations as a tool to gain deeper insights into texts. Their discussions should influence the way they read and think. By working in clubs, your fifth graders will be directly engaging in this work of using discussion as an analytic tool to develop new thinking.

You'll want to see each reading unit as cyclical, pulling in all the skills and strategies children have learned before, while simultaneously teaching toward new heights. In this unit, this is particularly true. This is a unit which offers opportunities to address Common Core State

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Standards in reading literature and informational texts, as students will interpret and analyze themes across genres. Previous units have supported students in working to meet these standards and this unit will reinforce that learning with an emphasis on interpretation and analyzing authorial craft. You'll want to remember that fifth graders are expected to ground their ideas more deeply than ever in textual evidence and analyze the text in much more complex ways than ever before. They are expected to "quote accurately" from the text to support thinking when reading in any genre (RL/RI 5.1). In addition, in most of the standards in reading literature, there is mention of students needing to "draw on specific details in the text." For example, by the end of this school year, children are expected to be able to determine the theme from "details in a text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic" (RL 5.2), and compare and contrast characters, settings, and events in a story or drama "drawing on specific details in the text (e.g. how characters interact)" (5.3). This means that children's theories must be firmly rooted in evidence and must span the whole of a text when reading any genre.

Furthermore, students must be able to begin to analyze author's craft and structure in much more complex ways than ever before as they are expected to "explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem (5.5)," and "describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described (5.6)." The Common Core expects fifth graders to read and interpret across texts as they are expected to "compare and contrast stories in the same genre (e.g., mysteries and adventure stories) on their approaches to similar themes and topics" (RL 5.9). This unit, building on the work that came before it, its designed to help children do this cross-text thematic work.

You'll know your students are ready for this teaching if, as you look over their Post-its and listen to their partner conversations, you see that they are regularly inferring about the characters in their stories, and are synthesizing the narrative elements in the stories they read. If, for instance, a student is reading *Because of Winn-Dixie* and has no trouble keeping track of the characters, figuring out where the story is taking place, and what kind of town the story is at the beginning and end of the story, that student is ready to also realize that *Because of Winn-Dixie* is the kind of novel that suggests important themes—it's a book that teaches us how to live. If, on the other hand, when you talk to that same student about *Because of Winn-Dixie*, he or she seems to talk only about what is happening right now in the book, without connecting that action to earlier events, and as you check in with another student, you see that same 'reading-for-plot-and-constantly-surprised-by-the-plot' kind of reading, then you may want to turn *Unit Two: Following Characters into Meaning*, in this curricular calendar, or in the *Units of Study for Teaching Reading, Grades 3-5*. This interpretation unit makes the most sense for readers who are reading books, at minimum, at level P and above, and who are regularly inferring about the characters' emotions, traits, and changes in their books. Ideally, the bulk of your readers will be level T and above when you embark on this unit. That said, you will want the goal of your teaching to be to help all of your readers reach and exceed grade level expectations so however you adapt the unit you will want to keep that goal in mind.

Overview

The unit has three main bends, each one leading students towards increasingly more nuanced thinking, while also guiding students to this sort of thinking in steps, so that they can do the work independently, not merely follow their teacher's thinking. It's an easy job to tell young readers what the ideas are in a novel. It's easy to tell them a theme and have them find evidence for that theme in a text. It's easy, that is, to hand over a piece of literature as content to your students and have them hunt and peck for answers to questions you devise. It is much more challenging to teach young people to think for themselves, and to be dissatisfied with easy, literal, undisputed reading and thinking. And the Common Core State Standards expects this sort of thinking; this ability to interpret and analyze a text and determine multiple ideas and themes (RL/RI 5.2). To meet this call, your readers will need some specific strategy instruction in analytical reading practices, or else they will remain ever dependent on collaborative, teacher-led, co-authored understandings.

Bend One begins with students revisiting familiar texts, thinking about the ideas these texts suggest. You'll teach students to reconsider and 'reread' prior events and texts. You'll teach them that stories are never about just one idea, showing them the way that the Standards call for analyzing nonfiction texts, for more than one idea, is also relevant for fiction. And then pretty quickly, you'll engage your readers in studying longer novels and texts and you'll show your readers that ideas live in more than one text. In Bend Two, you'll move students to more nuanced reading and thinking, by teaching them to lay texts that are united thematically alongside of each other, and really investigate how an author develops a theme. Rarely are the settings, characters, or events exactly matched, and it is in these fine details that students, with your instruction, will learn to illuminate complexity, really analyzing how ideas that at first glance appear the same, may be different either in their development, or in their details (CCSS RL 5.3). Imagine how this thinking will help your students in later life, as they learn to ask colleagues, leaders, and co-citizens, "Wait, I think that these ideas are similar, but somewhat different in their implications or applications."

Finally, in Bend Three, you'll offer your students analytical lenses for interpretation that focus on symbolism and literary craft, so that students are alert to the metaphors (CCSS RL 5.4) in the texts that they encounter. This ability to think metaphorically enriches students' experience of literature, it hones their thinking in new directions, and it will enhance their own language and expressiveness. Your students will emerge from this unit more alert to the metaphoric allusions and rhetoric in the texts they encounter, whether it is the idea that the dog is a pivotal character in *Because of Winn-Dixie*, or that the suitcase is more than a suitcase in *Bud, Not Buddy*.

Once students can see that texts often address the same theme, then you can help students notice differences in nuances of the message or in each author's treatment of the message. Students will be able to contrast how authors present or develop a meaning, theme, or character—first in conversation, and then in writing. You can meanwhile teach a parallel unit in the writing workshop on writing literary essays, using some of the reading workshop (as well as other short-text work) as grist for their writing mills.

Getting Started: Preparing Your Classroom Library

This unit will not require any special new texts. Universal ideas (i.e., literary themes) are universal because they are important in a great many texts. You will not need especially constructed text-sets in order for readers to think about how different authors convey the same theme. So you don't have to make a basket labeled 'struggle against nature' and fill it with *Skylark*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *Out of the Dust*, and informational texts about natural disasters. The unit is going to lead students to do much more intellectual work than simply find evidence of a pre-named theme. Your students will, though, as mentioned, want to do this work collaboratively in clubs—so you and they should gather texts of which you have multiple copies.

In the past we have suggested that students read primarily from novels with a few short pieces from other genres thrown into the mix. This year we are still recommending that students have a steady supply of novels, picture books, and short stories as well as a large chunk of nonfiction texts around a variety of topics. The integration of nonfiction will serve several purposes. First off, it supports intertextual work across genres, helping students to integrate information from multiple texts on a topic, helping them to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably (CCSS RI 5.9). This work will also help prepare students for the demands of the standardized tests, where they are often asked to think and write across one informational and one narrative text. Furthermore, students will receive extra practice in reading informational texts, thus helping them to continue to make progress in moving up to higher levels in the 4-5 text complexity band (RI 5.10).

Nonfiction texts can be from nonfiction books such as biographies of people, historical accounts, anthologies, expository texts, as well as articles from magazines, editorials, first-person accounts, speeches, and other short texts. It is also helpful to set your room up so children can be resourceful readers, seeking out their own information when needed. Consider using your classroom computers to bookmark sites of interest, choosing sites that are written for kids and provide general information about social issues (which may relate to themes across many of the texts) like bullying and peer pressures.

You may make it easier to tackle this work by having copies available of your prior read aloud texts. It will be important for your class to have a set of shared texts to mine in this unit—and presumably those will be the texts (novels, picture books, short stories, informational texts, and so on) you have read aloud all year. If you have not done much reading aloud and your class does not have a shared repertoire of texts, then begin reading aloud now! Helping your students to revisit texts which you have already read together can offer them the chance to now do the complex work of laying these texts against each other and looking for themes, symbols, metaphors which run across. And as you engage in new read-alouds during this unit, you will want to help students continue to make connections, compare, contrast and analyze across all of those previous read texts.

Ensure that your lower level readers (like all of your readers) have access to books that they can read with over 96% accuracy, fluency, and comprehension, which offer possibilities of more complicated themes. It's often easier to do analytical thinking, in higher level texts, because the

texts themselves are so complex. So make sure that you've gathered narratives that are as suggestive and complicated as possible, for your readers of every level. *Dragon Slayer Academy*, for instance, at levels N-O, offers wild complexities and provocative themes, whereas it may be hard (but not impossible) to develop thematic understanding in *Magic Tree House*. They are both terrific series, but you may highlight one over the other in this unit of study. Look over your library with that lens, imagine yourself doing the work of this unit in the books that are available. Another way to support your more emergent readers is to give these children a bin of mixed-genre leveled texts that make an issue or theme visible, or else create a basket of texts that will naturally point them to consider themes around an issue the texts make more overt, perhaps ones about which you know they will be passionate. So you might therefore create a basket of texts that demonstrate the pressures people feel to fit in, knowing that this will offer your readers more support in determining themes. And you will want to also evaluate your listening center and ensure that you have audio copies of informational texts and literature available in order to allow all students in your class to access complex themes, concepts and writing which they may not have been able to otherwise.

We suggest that you deliberately make all of your collections very small—no more than three books and a handful of short texts—so there's room for children to add to the collections. If you don't classify the books your children know best, this becomes something they can do, and they'll see how books and other texts can show many issues. For suggestions of possible leveled books to include in your Interpretation study, you might visit the Resources section of our website (www.readingandwritingproject.com) to see suggested resources for the unit on Social Issues. Issues are not the same as themes but often texts that explore similar issues may also convey similar themes as well. For possible nonfiction texts, we suggest that in addition to looking for updates on our website, you begin to collect articles that deal with topics and issues that you know will likely be discussed in your classroom (in part because you know what leveled fiction books you have available). These articles can be found in children's magazines such as *Time for Kids*, *Scholastic News*, *WR News*, *Highlights*, and *New Moon* as well as online.

Assessment

As with any unit, teachers need to first decide upon the skills that will be forwarded. You will want to gather data to inform your teaching and help you to see how your students have grown at reading literature and informational texts before starting the unit. To do so, you might read aloud a short story or picture book, pausing at prompts you have embedded and asking students to write in response to these. "How does this scene fit with what has come before?" you might ask at one point. "What does this phrase mean? Why is it important to the story?" you might ask at another point when you come to a metaphor. And, at the end, you might ask students, "Write about what you think this story is really truly about. Use details from the story to support your thinking." Then on the next day, you might read a short informational text (or excerpt from longer informational text), again pausing to ask students to write and making sure to ask questions which push students to compare and contrast the texts but also discuss how reading one text informs the reading of another. So you might read aloud the second text and ask, "How does what you learned from the first text help you understand this text better?"

You might also choose to then read a poem aloud, asking students to interpret themes that run across all three. That is, you will want to glimpse what your kids can do with analyzing across texts and articulating their ideas about texts in writing, with substantive evidence gathered and cited from the texts. Chances are very good that all your students need considerable help with these skills, in which case, you will be wise to teach this unit with a lot of heft, using your small groups and individual conferring and book clubs as forum for supporting your students' progress towards being able to read analytically. As mentioned in previous calendars, the *Informational Reading* and *Literature Reading Continua* are available to schools who work with the Project closely to help you assess your students, decide upon next teaching steps, provide informative feedback to help readers make progress and involve students in self-assessment. You likely have co-constructed student-facing rubrics for both of these continua during your earlier units. You'll want to bring both of these out and help students to revisit and revise their goals and action plans for reading literature and informational text.

Bend One – Considering the Implications of Texts

To begin the unit, you'll re-offer your students an invitation to interpretation work, reminding them that events in our lives are open to analysis, just as events and characters in books will be. You'll teach all your students how to return to critical moments in their lives and learn more from those moments. The unit begins with what the Common Core State Standards suggest are the "applications" of more complex thinking—the ability to analyze any experience. Students will have an opportunity to revisit moments in their lives, and then to revisit favorite texts. Then they'll quickly move to other texts, while their interpretive zeal is strong.

The goal of the first two days is to give kids (and ourselves) lots of repeated practice interpreting so that over the two days, everyone becomes fluent with this sort of thinking, more aware of text-interpretations that exist out there in the world, more accustomed to speaking in this analytical, idea-based 'language.' We also want kids to realize that they are interpreting all the time, and that any one event or story can have lots of different interpretations. An important thing to realize is that sometimes we have taught interpretation as the One Big Idea that a text teaches, channeling kids to think about this only when they are two thirds of the way through a text or done with it, or after a teacher has suggested an idea, thus channeling them towards the interpretation that we have decided is the best one. The problem is that when we do this, we put interpretation on a high-up shelf, out of reach from kids' sticky fingers—and we take away the thinking work, leaving kids in the role of miners looking for diamonds that will belong to someone else. As a result, lots of kids (and frankly, lots of teachers) feel uncomfortable with the 'correctness' of their own interpretation. There is a feeling that this is literary criticism and we are not sure we're entitled to have a go at it, when in fact, any interpretation, just like any text, is open to debate, and needs to be validated, examined, and justified.

So this part of the unit aims to reverse or avoid that damage, helping kids know that interpretation is what thoughtful people do all throughout our lives, and it is within grasp of us all. By inviting kids to feel at home interpreting, we expect they'll become accustomed to this way of thinking and this way of talking about texts, and their interpretations will get far better just from immersion. So please, during this first bend in the road of the unit, issue a generous invitation to kids, welcome much of what they say, don't get bent out of shape by what may

seem like shallow interpretations, and know that your students' room for growth stems largely from unfamiliarity with doing this work independently.

In your first lesson, you may teach a lesson that begins in your life and then moves to familiar stories. First, you'll tell your readers that good readers don't read just to find out what characters do, or what happens in stories. Powerful readers also realize that the stories we read are about ideas—they literally teach us how to live. Then you'll invite your students to first consider how, in their own lives, there have been experiences which have taught life-lessons. You'll probably want to model on a real-life story that seems significant in your own life—perhaps one that you have already modeled with in writing workshop. Right from the start, then, you'll be teaching that we're not searching for one idea, but that analytical thinkers develop ideas about events and experiences.

In the same session, you can have your readers revisit the narratives they've written in their writers' notebooks, and analyze them for ideas or life-lessons they see in them. Then they can turn to the stories they've read, and talk club members, sharing their ideas about stories they've read this year so far. Coach into how kids support their ideas with evidence, reminding them to quote from the text (5.1) and teach them to listen closely to each other, and to add on to the ideas that are brought up, so that they build a cornucopia of ideas together. If this teaching seems like too much for one lesson, you could break it into two lessons—the first where you teach students that moments in our lives are open to interpretation, and you and your students reconsider real-life moments for the ideas or life-lessons they suggest, and a second lesson where you teach that moments in books also teach life-lessons, and you and your students reconsider favorite stories you've read so far this year.

For homework, you might invite students to do this same work on the television programs they watch, or the books they are reading on their own, or the events that happen in their days. Students will love the invitation to watch a TV show, each of them, thinking, 'What does this character learn? What can the character teach?' You can help students ask this question using other phrases or terms as well, which is a wise thing to do as eventually standardized tests will ask them this same question, and there are a lot of different ways to word the question. Alternately, students could be invited to think about the people in their families who are always drawing life lessons from things that happen. Perhaps it is a grandparent who comes from an event saying, "See what I mean? I always tell you—families have to stick together." That's interpretation.

If your kids have a lot of trouble interpreting, you will want to do a lot more work reading aloud, and show them how you begin to think interpretively. We recommend you watch Kathleen Tolan's work with *The Giving Tree* on the DVD that accompanies *Units of Study for Reading*, and watch the active moves Tolan makes as she demonstrates and supports kids to move from reading actively to reading interpretively. Notice that she slows down the process of thinking interpretively, saying, "Hmmm...I'm just wondering...what *could* this be teaching me?... Hmmm...I'm thinking about..." (Then she recalls, rereads.) "What *could* that mean....Could it maybe mean....Or could it mean....?" You can do similar work, stretching out and slowing down the process of interpreting so that kids begin to climb up on their knees, saying, "I know! I got an

idea!” And then, if their ideas are not particularly strong, try to accept them anyhow, listen to them, and find better ideas within those flawed ones.

In your next lesson, you may turn your readers to pivotal moments in stories, showing them how to pay attention to moments in stories when characters experience strong emotions and/or make critical choices. These moments are also ones where readers have an opportunity to learn from the decisions characters make. Again, you’ll reteach that at each of these moments in a story, readers can make more than one interpretation, and construct more than one idea that may turn out to be significant. You’ll want to alert your readers, as well, to how powerful readers remain open as they keep moving through a book, seeing how their ideas play out. Probably, you’ll demonstrate this work on a read aloud text that is familiar to your kids, and so your students will probably also want to return to favorite texts. There is value in giving students opportunities to reread texts, and here they’ll have a chance to revisit favorites, thumbing through the pages for remembered moments, reconsidering those more analytically, jotting down ideas those parts suggest, and then arguing and defending those ideas with their partners and club members. As readers talk to each other, teach them to listen carefully not for if they agree with an idea, but if the author of that idea justifies it well—that is, do your readers assemble textual evidence for their arguments?

In what’s probably lesson three, you may find it helpful to begin with a chart that students co-author, of the ideas and lessons that clubs are gathering from their revisiting of prior stories. Immediately, students will begin to see that just as stories are about more than one idea, an idea may also appear in more than one story. This, you may explain to them if they do not know already, is the notion of theme—an idea that appears in more than one story. You may make this lesson one in which you remind them that readers call on their prior reading practices, such as being alert to how more than one text may suggest similar themes. If that seems fuzzy to your readers, then use a chart to visibly articulate themes that seem as if they appear in more than one of your read-alouds. The idea, for instance, that even a child may make a tremendous difference in a community, is suggested by *Because of Winn-Dixie*. It is also suggested by *The Other Side* and the *Harry Potter* series. Demystifying ‘theme’ so that young readers can analyze texts for their thematic implications themselves, rather than awaiting a sacrosanct, preconceived theme, may be among the most important, and early work, that happens in this unit of study. In later years, when one of your students is ‘told’ what the theme is of a novel, that young intellectual will probably say, ‘perhaps, though I also see other possibilities such as...’ In the same manner, your students will need to be convinced, with evidence, of the integrity of ideas that they are presented with. Reading is how we train our minds.

It may also be helpful to chart some phrases readers sometimes use when they are talking about interpretations, (and which could also be used to help students form their thesis statements as they write literary essays in the parallel writing workshop) such as:

- When I first read this story, I thought it was just about...., but now that I think deeper about it, I realize that really, it is also about....
- Often people....but this story shows that it’s possible people should...
- I used to think...but now after reading this I think...because...

- I learned from (the character, the event) that in life, it can be important to....
- This story teaches us not only about...., but also about....

As students engage in this work, coach into their work by showing them that always, they need to support their ideas with evidence from the text. If they select passages from the text that seem tangentially related to the main idea, then say, “Does the connection between that and your idea hit you over the head, seem totally obvious, or is it a bit hard to see? If it is not hit-you-over-the-head obvious, usually it helps to think of another example from the text, or to say more about why this example seems so relevant. Perhaps your idea is more complicated than you thought at first.”

So far, students have been analyzing stories they have lived, and stories they have already read. For the following lessons, club members need to be in new books, so have them choose a book at the end of this session, if they haven’t done so already, and get started reading it for homework. It is crucial to launch your clubs into novels now to continue to sustain a large volume of reading and so that when students reach the second part of the literary essay unit which calls for them to write comparative essays, they can use the novels they read now as one of the texts to be compared and contrasted.

Since your students have been revisiting familiar texts, they’ll mostly be thinking after they’ve finished the book. Now, in what’s probably lesson four, you’ll want to teach your readers that we don’t wait until we’re done with a book, to begin constructing ideas, and designing reading plans to investigate these ideas. You may want to go to your current read aloud text, and talk about some of the ideas the text is suggesting so far. Teach your readers to jot these down, to substantiate them by giving a little ‘boxes-and-bullets’ speech to club members, and to be ready to read on gathering evidence for these ideas. Then give them an opportunity to do the same work in their own books. Remind them that good books are about more than one idea, as well, so teach them to follow more than one idea as they go forward.

Finally, in lesson five, you’ll want to teach your students that powerful readers revise our ideas as we keep reading. Show them how sometimes ideas develop into more complicated ideas. Sometimes ideas we had about a text, as we keep reading, simply are no longer true—the text diverges and the story suggests alternative ideas, so readers have to remain flexible and alert. And sometimes ideas that seemed important come to seem smaller next to more significant ideas. What’s important is that your readers remain alert and responsive, and that they expect to keep validating their ideas and revising them. You might show students that at first *Because of Winn-Dixie* seems to be the story of a lonely girl who makes friends with a dog—teaching us, perhaps, that a dog can be a best friend. But then the story takes a new turn, and it tells about how Opal’s relationship with her dog seems to change her relationship with her father, leading one to think that the story may be about how learning to love a dog can help people learn to love people, too. Readers can learn to talk about how the book’s message unfolds over time by saying, ‘First when I started to read this, I thought that deep down, it was maybe about...but now as I read on, I’m finding that it is also about....’”

For example, if you were to read aloud *The Tiger Rising*—you might find yourself thinking aloud when Rob makes the choice to save Sistine from the group of kids who are beating her up at lunch. You might say, "Wow, Rob really surprised me by standing up for Sistine and saving her from that gang of kids. This is such a contrast to Rob who, up until this point, has shown us that he has become an expert at 'not-thinking' about anything that bothers him. Remember how earlier in the story, Rob's 'not-thinking' strategy made us grow some ideas about how a really terrible loss, like Rob losing his mom, can make people shut down? And some of us even wondered if shutting down, like Rob does, is just something that grieving people have to do to protect themselves from all the hurt. Well, after watching Rob take on Sistine's attackers and then sit with her on the bus, my thinking is starting to change a bit. Rob may be good at shutting down his feelings about everything and everyone, but I realize it's not really working for him. Rob enjoys the 'thrill' of saving Sistine, but then he's terrified of talking to her, of letting his feelings show. Maybe this story is beginning to be more about how after a terrible loss, somehow people have to learn to trust again and to let themselves grow close to others. We'll have to see if and how Rob does that..."

As you work to help students determine themes in literature, you will also want to help them determine multiple main ideas in informational texts. You might start helping students to make interpretations across genres by beginning by offering them nonfiction articles, editorials, letters, and so on around topics and issues which they are noticing in literature. Students can use the same methods to grow thematic ideas around informational texts that they used when reading literature. For example, they likely have used the strategy of carrying an index card with them through and across books which has a text-specific idea on one side, and then later adding a universal theme to the reverse side as a means of scaffolding from text-based to wider theme-development. You might choose to now build off this work, helping students to write a text-specific idea about an informational text on one side of a card and jot on the reverse side more universal notions. So, for example, if a student has read *Gorillas* by Seymour Simon, the student might jot "Gorillas will do anything to protect their families" on one side of a card and once the student has considered how this can be a larger idea about life, the student might return to her card and on the reverse side write, "Sometimes in life you do anything for the ones you love." An idea such as this can easily be held in mind as the student returns to her club and they begin to interpret other texts which they have read to see if they might also show this theme. A club reading (or discussing a previous class read-aloud) such as *Becoming Naomi León*, might begin to notice that this text also seems to convey this theme. Gram takes Naomi and Owen and flees to Mexico. She will do anything to keep them safe. As will, a club might notice, Mrs. Trotter for Gilly. And Dog for Magpie. And Elizabeth for Ronald. Of course, these stories do not all convey these themes in the same way—after all while Elizabeth will do anything for the one she loves, she also comes to realize that sometimes the ones you love are not the ones you should love. Even when texts convey similar themes, each text develops this theme in nuanced ways which are different and analyzing these subtle differences in development is the critical work of the next bend.

Bend Two – Themes May Be the Same Across Texts, But They’re Usually Developed Differently

You’ll probably notice that your readers eagerly jumped to show that an idea that is true in one text may be true in another. In fact, you can expect that they’ll begin to see themes everywhere, and that they’ll lapse into cliché, or even into proverbs, that they’ll overstate, and simplify. Donna Santman, author of *Shades of Meaning: Teaching Comprehension and Interpretation*, reminds us that what is cliché to us as adults, is remarkably original to a young reader. So you have to keep your face straight and be impressed when they notice that *Oliver Button is a Sissy* and *The Other Side* both show...that it’s okay to be different! “‘It takes all kinds,’ as my grandmother says,” one student will say. Then her club will apply that idea to all their texts eagerly. Then too, students might also be considering these texts against biographies of people who have faced trouble and bring their interpretations of those texts to their reading of Oliver and Clover. That said, our next job will be to teach students the Common Core Standards work, of analyzing how a text makes a theme visible—how that theme is developed, where and how you see it becoming more visible in the text, and how that development is undoubtedly different in different texts (RL 5.2). Oliver Button and Clover from *The Other Side* are not, in fact, the same in every way. They are similar in how they tackle trouble with fortitude. They are similar in how they hold onto their dreams. They are similar in how they are lonely. But they are not similar in many other ways. Oliver tackles differences in gender expectations, whereas Clover tackles the color line. Oliver acts alone, whereas Clover carries others into her scheme. The time, the place, the characters, and the kind of trouble they face, are different.

In lesson one of this bend, therefore, you’ll praise your readers for noticing how themes live in more than one text, and you’ll study the classroom charts that document these themes intently, perhaps holding up some of your read aloud texts as you demonstrate. “You know,” you may say, “I’m realizing that while some of these stories have the same theme, there’s also a lot of differences in these stories. It seems to me that it would be fascinating to investigate what’s different about stories that have the same theme. I know that when I think people are the same, it turns out that I can usually learn a lot from how we’re different as well. For instance, I’m drawn to Dylan because he’s such an avid reader—he’s a lot like me. But he reads different kinds of books, and now I’ve learned to love a lot of those books, too. Or Sarah and I share a love for the Kings of England—but she loves the modern ones and I love the historical ones, so we learn a lot from each other when we pore over what’s different in our knowledge. This is making me realize that it will be worth studying what’s different in stories that are linked thematically, and seeing what it makes us realize. One way to study those differences is to study what’s different about the setting.”

You may need a lesson on some of the practicalities that help readers study and compare texts. Your readers, now, will continue to read the books they are choosing for their clubs, but they’ll analyze and talk about those books, in the context of other books they’ve read before, putting ones alongside each other that they think are related, and learning now to analyze the nuances in how these stories are different as well as similar. (There is further information on support for clubs, for how they choose their books, for how they interact with each other, and for how they document their work, below.) It may be helpful to have a chart up, that some students may make, with the titles, characters, places, and themes or issues that occur in your read aloud texts from

this year, and old favorites that your class remembers. Or make color copies of the covers and hang them on the bulletin board—any kind of visible reminder helps students recall earlier texts and work with them. You can also demonstrate how to leaf through the pages of your reading notebook, if your kids are keeping them, reminding yourself of earlier books you've read, and of ideas you had in those books. And just as, when you showed your students how to revisit their writers' notebooks to see new ideas in old stories, you can show them how, as you revisit and remind yourself of stories you read before, in the light of your new thinking, you have new understandings and insight.

In your third lesson of this bend, you'll teach your students that just as we can study how the settings of stories that share themes are usually different, and that difference has implications for how the theme develops in the story, there are usually differences also in the characters—in their backgrounds, their perspectives and points of views, and their traits. If you examine how Oliver Button responds to trouble, for instance, in *Oliver Button is a Sissy*, he is quiet, almost silent about his determination. He acts in open defiance of his father's urge that he play "any kind of ball" — but he does it not by arguing, but by asking for something different—dance lessons. He doesn't ask for help when the boys bully him. He forges quietly ahead, and it is his silent fortitude that wins over some in his community, such as his father. Clover, on the other hand, also wants to be different. She too doesn't believe the same things her mother does. So both books share a similar theme (and probably several themes), that kids don't always believe the same things as their parents. But the characters show those beliefs somewhat differently. Neither child speaks in defiance, but Clover immediately enlists other children into her actions. She assumes that kids share beliefs, and in fact, the children she meets rise to those expectations, whereas Oliver is teased and bullied by his peers.

Expect that your readers will like to study texts deeply and to engage in intellectual work—and you'll find that they enjoy analyzing and arguing the nuances of how their stories are different. And all the time, they are training their minds. The same kind of thinking that allows lawyers to prepare defenses, and researchers to create new vaccines, is this paying attention to detail, poring over material, and honing ideas with intellectual zeal.

If your students need more support with finding places in their texts where characters demonstrate how they help develop a theme in similar and different ways, point them to the moments in their narratives when characters face trouble, and coach them to analyze how characters respond to trouble. You may want to remind them that one reason we read is not just to study themes as an intellectual exercise, but to learn how to live from the characters in stories. Bronwyn Davies, the great gender researcher, writes that children learn about possibility from the stories they encounter in school. Teach your students, thus, that readers draw conclusions about characters' traits from how they respond to trouble and then teach them to compare those traits with their own. Teach them that our characters, like our ideas, are revisable—we can at any moment, choose to try to respond differently, to be different. Our own selves are a constant process of revision.

In what's probably your fifth lesson of this bend of the unit, you'll teach a repertoire lesson—that is, rather than laying out a new strategy, you'll show your students how they have increased

their repertoire of reading practices, and you'll show them how to access that repertoire with fluency and delight. You may teach your students that, just as a basketball player who has been practicing dribbling and throwing drills, finds in a game that he or she does all that work automatically, while simultaneously processing who is where on the court, the amount of time left in the quarter, and where the ball is going, a reader takes on all the parts of the story as it comes in, now with increased alertness and expertise and thus increased responsiveness. For example, we begin to ask ourselves early on, 'what is this story beginning to be about?' We begin to track ideas, we collect moments along the way that support those ideas, we recall other stories we've read and we think and talk about how the story we are reading compares to those, we weigh our own lives and decisions with those characters make, we have epiphanies where we are struck with possible life-lessons that books leave us with. Moreover, as the books we read get more complicated, things are not always what they seem. Characters that appeared trustworthy may not be, and thus their relationship to themes and lesson they demonstrate will shift. Any reader of *Harry Potter* knows this. But with our training, we are that basketball player, weaving with grace and power through complicated courts of deception, ruse, and opposition.

Know that your readers will be starting to work on comparative essays in writing workshop and the work they have done during this bend will be incredibly important. Thus, you will want to help students see how they can write about what they have noticed about how texts develop themes differently and you might begin this work by pushing clubs to speak in mini compare and contrast essays. You might put up the same sorts of prompts and planning structures used in the literary essay unit and involve club members in co-constructing an essay (see the end of this write-up for further information on how to do this).

Bend Three – Symbolism and Literary Devices and Their Relationship to the Meanings and Themes of Stories

Students take great joy in being introduced to symbolism, and in exploring symbolism as an analytical lens. Again, remember what Donna Santman says about cliché. The notion that the fence in the *Other Side* is more than a wooden fence, that it is a metaphoric fence, is an absolute epiphany to readers who haven't investigated the history of the color line in this country. Wait, they'll say—"this fence...it's not just in Clover's back yard." Investigating and articulating symbolism has tremendous intellectual potential for young readers. Because that fence wasn't just in Clover's yard, and that fence manifests itself differently in different places, times, situations. Teach your students, therefore, that one way readers are moved by literature, is that we are moved by the symbols that seem significant. We can begin to see and say, that objects, for instance, have symbolic importance. Usually, you simply need to give a stream of examples, and invite students to add to this stream during your lesson for students to grasp how symbolism works: the fence in *The Other Side* and fences in anyone's lives; the dragon in *The Paper Bag Princess* and the dragons that any of us face in our lives. Move from these obvious, explicit symbols, to ones that may be less obvious and more metaphoric—the hat that symbolizes gang acceptance in Eve Bunting's *Your Move*, the chess game in that same story, the dog in *Because of Winn-Dixie*—each of these objects is laden with potential meaning.

As has been your mantra in this unit, refrain from telling your students what these symbols mean, and instead issue an invitation to explore symbolism. Your students will return to old favorites,

and begin to dig into the texts they are reading. Show them how to use their pencils and notebooks to articulate their ideas about symbols. Expect sketches and excitement, expect your students to notice first the grand and obvious symbols, expect to lament that they seem to miss the smaller, more subtle ones—and then decide whether to alert them to some of the these, perhaps through disguised book club conversations, “I’m just wondering about the pitcher of water too...have any of you wondered about that?” or by showing how readers sometimes return to old favorites and pore over them again, reconsidering the significance of objects and moments that seemed mysterious before. It does help, to teach students that in good stories, details matter.

In your second lesson of this bend, you’ll turn to another symbolic element that may be surprisingly new to students—the notion that titles can be symbolic as well. You’ll teach your readers that often a moment comes in our reading when we realize that the title may have significance. Sometimes it is at the end of the story, and sometimes earlier in the story, when we’ll come upon a line, or a scene, that seems to directly refer back to the title. Invite your readers to consider what *The Other Side*, and *Fly Away Home* and *The Tiger Rising* mean in the context of the story. Invite them to consider why it’s *Because of Winn-Dixie* and not simply *Winn-Dixie*. Your book clubs will hopefully be zealots about returning to their conversations and arguing and defending what the titles of books they have read might mean. Usually titles have metaphoric significance, often deeply related to possible meanings of the story—what the story may be about. Rob gains courage, he emerges from a deeply hidden self, he is a Tiger Rising, he shows us that we too, can become tigers, rising.

In the following couple of sessions, you have some choices about how to increase your students’ flexibility and skill with analytical thinking and synthesis in complex texts. One option is to teach them about literary devices, such as foreshadowing, repetition, and perspective, and how these devices help an author develop and complicate themes. Essentially, for students this age, we teach them that powerful readers know that in good stories, details matter, and we ask ourselves about details that seem to be in the text without other context. For example, if there is a cat, and you are wondering why the cat is in that scene, that is the same literary device as Chekov’s gun—if there’s a gun in act one, you can expect it to go off in act three—it’s probably there as foreshadowing. Often, we understand how events have been foreshadowed, when we finish a text—so you may demonstrate how we return to the beginning of a story sometimes, seeing more and delighting in how clever the author was to lay down a trail of breadcrumbs. *Harry Potter* readers are expert at this kind of synthesis—they can connect clues and events across literally thousands of pages of texts, and they are alert to twists. Small scenes along the way alerted *Harry Potter* readers to the theme that characters are not always what they seem, that Snape might be cruel but also heroic, that small character flaws may not mean the impossibility of greatness.

Return to the beginning of *The Tiger Rising* and you’ll find so many clues there about Rob’s character, troubles, and potential, that didn’t really make that much sense when we read the chapter the first time—it’s only later that we recall them or revisit them. *Edward’s Eyes* also demonstrates the significance of foreshadowing beautifully. Even before you begin the story, you’re pretty sure there’s something special about Edward. And you’re pretty sure that he’s dead. There are two aspects of understanding foreshadowing that help readers navigate more complex

texts. One aspect is that it teaches a discipline of rapid, on-the-run rereading. Anyone who has tackled a complicated text knows that we often turn back quickly, recalling something that seems connected, that was perhaps foreshadowed earlier, and that we now recognize as being significant. So we turn back, rapidly. A second aspect of understanding the potential significance of foreshadowing is that we are alert to details that might otherwise seem random. It's the Chekov gun syndrome. If the author inserts a detail that seems somewhat unexplained, chances are that the reader will find that it matters later, both to what happens in the story, and to what the story may mean or be about. Analyzing foreshadowing well means that readers must synthesize across many, many pages of texts, and that they must be comfortable holding on to some unexplained questions as they read, having faith that later, the answers will be revealed. To continue to push club conversations to act as tools for analytic thought and growing new ideas, members can discuss unexplained details together, drawing conclusions that they can then take to their own reading and revise in future conversations. Members can push each other to notice when a detail seems somewhat unexplained or when there is potential foreshadowing and ask themselves and other club members: why is this here?

Another literary device that is worth teaching not just in poetry but in reading and analyzing literature is repetition. Teach your readers, for instance, that it's not just objects that may be repeated in a text. Sometimes it is lines, and sometimes there are parallel scenes, or moments—when things are almost the same but perhaps slightly different. In *Number the Stars*, for instance, the moment comes in the text when that actual line appears—more than once. An alert reader realizes that there is probably significance in that repetition. You might return to familiar read-alouds, to show your readers that sometimes, a bell goes off in the reader's head, and we say to ourselves—this is here more than once, I wonder if it's important? In *Fly Away Home*, for instance, the narrator speaks repeatedly about the blue clothes they wear: the blue shirts, the blue jeans, the blue bags. The character is, clearly, not just wearing blue clothes, he is blue. But it's the repetition that alerts us to the character's mood—that the author chooses to make so many things blue, in repetition that alerts the reader that blue may matter. Ultimately the boy perhaps shows us that we may feel blue, but we can still hold onto hope. You might invite your students to find the words, phrases, lines which seem to have the most meaning in their stories—helping them to see how a phrase which is repeated or seems to be placed in a pivotal moment can have great significance for determining a theme of a text. By this time of the year, students have likely engaged in write-arounds where a symbol or object or photograph is placed in the middle of chart paper and students all write thinking around this symbol, drawing lines and arrows to show when their comments built off of the comments of others. Now, you can use that same method to push their abilities to analyze words and phrases, pushing clubs to jot words, phrases, and lines which seem particularly significant in the middle of chart paper and writing around these lines. Teach students to consider the multiple nuances of meaning of a word as well as its meaning for how it is used in the context of the story. Fox has “haunted” eyes. Students may decide to consider that term and why the author has chosen to describe Fox in that way. They might write about the multiple meanings of haunted and how that term is used to forward and develop ideas in this particular story.

Finally, you've undoubtedly taught your students before to analyze characters' perspectives and points of view, but this may be an apt time to return to that teaching and show them how to

analyze and compare the significance of character's perspectives to the possible meanings of a story. For instance, the narrator in *Fly Away Home* has a different perspective on airports than the other travelers in the story do—and thus he teaches us that places can seem very different, based on your condition. In doing this work, students are pushed to consider the relationship of craft to content and working to meet Standard 5.6 for Reading Literature which expects that fifth graders will “Describe how a narrator’s or speaker’s point of view influences how events are described.” You will want your students to realize that the teller of the story influences how the story is told. This is heady, complex work. How can students realize how a narrator influences the description of events? How might they see the deliberate crafting which has gone into the text to create a character’s point of view and how that view shades events? To determine this crafting, you will remind students to first draw upon their learning from fourth grade when they learned to “compare and contrast the point of view from which stories are narrated, including the difference between first-and third-person narrators” (RL 4.6).

Building on what they already know—that texts will be told very differently when they are told by a character within the story or a removed outsider—you will then help them to see that the choice of who tells the story is a deliberate one made by the author and for good reason. You might involve readers in revisiting and studying texts in which the narrator is a clear and interesting choice. *Edward’s Eyes*, for example. You will help your students to discuss why the author has chosen Jake to tell the story. What does the choice of Jake as narrator do for the mood and tone of the story? Isn’t *Edward’s Eyes* so very moving because of the way it is told by Jake, Edward’s brother, who has loved and lost him? The events are colored by a feeling of sadness that would never be present if Jake was not the narrator. And how interesting that he tells the story after the main events have passed. The choice to have Jake recount the events from a time somewhere later on rather than watch them unfurl before him in the moment means that the reader, along with Jake can experience the events and be moved in a way we would not have been otherwise. Simple ordinary family moments become incredibly meaningful when told from the point of view of Jake. Events take on double meaning because we know in our hearts and guts they are times that will never come again for this family. You might ask your readers to consider how the story might have been told otherwise if a third person narrator had told it or if Edward himself had told parts. What would be changed? What would be lost or gained in those different choices?

Another text with interesting, clear choice of narrator is *Home of the Brave* by Applegate, a novel told through poems. You might choose to read the entire text or focus on a few of the poems. In this text it is obvious that since Kek does not speak English and is in America for the first time, the events are described in ways that show he is confused. He is not sure of the English terms for objects, or why things happen in the new land he has entered. He believes, for example, that the trees have been killed until he is told that it is “winter.” You might involve your readers in discussing why the author has chosen Kek as narrator. How does that influence the mood and tone of parts of the story? How does that influence the way events are told? By starting this work on texts where the narrator is evident and there are more overt reasons for why an authorial decision has been made, students will be able to transfer and apply analysis of the narrator to their own texts. You might also involve your students in a study of the role of narrator. Often, particularly if narrators do not always seem to be involved in the main action of

the story, they play common roles in a story. You will want your readers to wonder over, for example, the choice of Kenny and not Byron as narrator in *Watsons Go to Birmingham*. You might ask your students to notice what narrator roles seem common across texts and why those choices are made.

Coaching Into Clubs

Some of your clubs may need some coaching in choosing books. They may, for instance, think that as they finish one book, in which they have talked long about a theme such that kids sometimes crack under family pressures, they may begin to search for a second book by expecting that theme to be listed on the back cover! You'll want to remind your students that good books are about many ideas, and that they should trust that as they begin a second book, pretty much any good book is going to be full of ideas, and some of those ideas will turn out to be related to those in their first book. If you know that there are one or two texts that will undoubtedly turn up some of the same ideas, of course, you could steer some of your club members in that direction—especially a club of more struggling readers, who may benefit from seeing obvious links between their two texts. Check in with club members as they finish their first novel and are about to begin their second novel. The more readers are tracking multiple ideas, rather than one single idea, the more they'll be ready to see thematic connections across novels. Could clubs be posting for each other the different themes or big ideas found in the short text, information texts and novels so the clubs can get suggestions from each other?

You may also find that readers move easily into seeing that books are related by theme, but they then don't seem to expect that the books will also have many differences, and these differences will also affect the meaning of the story. Visit with clubs as they are having conversations, and if needed, push them to look at the ways in which the time or place of the novels they are discussing are different, or the characters' traits are different, and how those differences affect the ideas these books suggest.

In order to scaffold some of our students in their club conversations, you might try using a large index card that on one side says, "Talk," and on the other side says "Essayists." This tool can be placed in between the club to support them as they reach to talk like essayists. Readers might begin talk by sharing out lots of ideas, and when once they reach a place where they think, "Oh! That's it, we need to talk long about this one," readers can flip over the card to a series of prompts that support talking like essayists. Some prompts might include:

One idea this book suggests is....

One example that shows (this idea) is...because...

Another example that shows (this idea) is...because...

This makes me realize/think that...

Or

I used to think this text was about...because...

Now I think this text is about...because...

This makes me realize/think that...

Or

These two texts are similar because they both teach that...

On the one hand, though, in the first book...

On the other hand, in the second book...

This makes me realize/think that...

A Big Question for readers to ask in club conversations is, “How do two or three different texts advance the same theme differently?” These conversations will help when you have readers rehearsing and writing multiple fast-draft “Compare and Contrast” essays on texts that seem to address similar themes. Authors may send their characters on strikingly (or at least somewhat) different journeys toward addressing and resolving a similar issue, or have them (and readers through them) learn variations of the same life lesson. In both *Those Shoes* and *Fly Away Home* the main characters must learn to go without something they desperately want. Both belong to families that struggle financially. And both boys learn to give up—at least for now—the dream of having something. For one boy it’s a pair of designer shoes, for the other it’s a home. The latter may seem much larger a want, but to Jeremy, those shoes mean so much more than a pair of shoes. And yet the paths these two boys follow toward dealing with not having what others around them have diverge. Jeremy comes close to getting what he wants, only to discover that it isn’t really possible to use the shoes himself (they are a size too small), and instead, gives them to his friend, for whom the shoes are a perfect fit. We might say that Jeremy learns (and we learn, too) that making someone else’s dream come true may not take away our own longing but can fill something else inside of us. Meanwhile, in *Fly Away Home*, Andrew never comes close to getting out of the airport; he and his dad scrape together money for small things, like food, but aren’t anywhere near to having the money to rent an apartment. But Andrew finds hope in a little bird that manages, after many tries, to free itself from the airport, and he begins to take small steps toward helping his dad save. One lesson here might be that working toward a dream is sometimes enough to keep you going. The point is that both of these stories address some of the same themes, but the journeys the characters take are different. Rehearsing and writing fast draft essays will help your students become adept at this kind of thinking, reading, and writing work.