

What is the point of Unit 3?

One of our users asked this question: What is the "point" of Unit 3? Some kids just hate the narrative and parents struggle with whether or not it is necessary to cover this unit with them. Could you give an explanation of the value or importance of this unit?

Andrew's Response:

This is, in fact a very interesting question, as I myself used to question the value of it. However, in continuing to teach Dr. Webster's syllabus, I now realize, much more clearly, the profound importance of the fiction parts of this program.

As you are aware, the nine structural units consist of both fiction and non-fiction models, which develop from simple stories and reports to formal essays and critiques. One of the critical elements in the process is developing the aptitude, and in fact the habit, of asking questions about what has been read. This process begins in Unit 3, when the student must read a story, and ask questions about it: who is in the story, when and where is it happening, what is the problem or conflict and what do the characters think, say and do, and of course, how is the problem solved and why did the author write it, or what moral or message is it conveying. This is the story sequence chart, which works for most short fiction stories, but it leads toward something much more important.

In Unit 5, writing from pictures, we have a similar task, only no story with words. There are pictures, and we must ask questions about the pictures in order to facilitate the thinking that will allow us to come up with ideas to describe the events in the picture and create an outline. Unlike the story sequence chart, where we are looking for characters and setting, conflict, and resolution, the Unit 5 model can more accurately be labeled as "event description." What do you see in the picture, and why is it happening. What happened just before the picture. What are the individuals in the picture thinking or feeling? What might happen after this picture? These Unit 5 questions are a natural extension of Unit 3 and a perfect bridge to Unit 7, inventive writing.

When we face Unit 7, we are facing "the blank page"--no source of ideas other than what is in our brain. To extract information out of our brain, we must have the habit of asking ourselves questions. Any old topic (my summer vacation, my Grandma, my hobby, etc.) must be approached in the same manner—by asking questions, only this time it can be harder for the child, since there was no story or picture to start with. Thus we see that this process of asking questions, hearing the answer in your mind, and taking a key word outline from your own thoughts is essential to creating the independent, analytical writer.

This comes to its fulfillment in Unit 8, formal essay models, when we are asking children to collect and organize facts, and then, in the conclusion, to comment on those facts: What is the significance of this information? Who can use it? Why is it important? How does it affect our life or our understanding of life? These questions represent the higher level of analytical thinking necessary for advanced essay composition. Therefore it

becomes very clear to the experienced teacher, that the habit of asking questions, hearing the answer and putting that answer into words (key words at first and full sentences and paragraphs after that) is indeed the essence of what the purpose of writing must be. See a problem, ask questions, and give answers, with structure and style.

Although it is tempting to question the validity or importance of the fiction or inventive units (3, 5 and 7), we must not bypass them, since they actually prepare a child for the thinking skills he or she must have for the real world of composition in high school or college. I myself used to think that story writing was pretty much a waste of time, but now I see it as an important and natural bridge for children to cross as they move toward the ability to make dynamic observations and create sophisticated, enlightening commentary on the problems and situations in the world.

The most common problem I see with parents attempting to use or teach the Unit 3 story sequence model, is the desire to do it "just right" or to use the questions in a "legalistic" way. "But this story doesn't fit the chart...." OK. So what? The goal of the story sequence chart and of the questions allocated for each paragraph is to assist the student in completing the outline; but if an idea doesn't work, don't use it! Change it if necessary. Basically, if you can get 3 outlines of 3-5 lines of 3-4 words per line, you'll be fine. How you get those words may vary. The questions are there to help, but if they don't work for you, scrap them. Do something else, but please don't skip the Unit 3 unless the effort at doing it totally kills your desire to continue through the syllabus.

For those who aren't quite sure how to teach it, relax. Use the stories in the workbook: Fox and Grapes, Bat and Nightingale, King's Feast, Lion and Shepherd, and Emperor's New Clothes. Those are tried and true stories, and anyone should be able to make those work. After a few tries with something familiar, you should then be brave enough to try a new story yourself. And don't discount the genius of the children. They will very often have ideas even when you don't.

I hope that helps everyone. I am praying for all our teachers everyday, and that their efforts to help and encourage each other are surely a great service, even to the many people who never post a message, but have similar concerns and questions.

God bless you,

Andrew Pudewa