

Building Units

Developing units that students find interesting, fun, and informative is one of the many responsibilities with which teachers struggle. One teacher told me, "I just don't have the talent to create units, so I just buy them from various publishers." While this may be an easy way to "create" units, it is certainly not the best or most practical one. Published units are a starting point and may have several great ideas that might be incorporated into any classroom. The best units, however, are those made by a teacher for a particular class *and modified year-to-year* to meet the demands and interests of the students. Think about the "best" lessons that you taught in the last year. Think about which lessons or units parents gave the most compliments. These, most likely, are the ones that the teacher developed (perhaps over time) for the class. They are the ones that are unique to that teacher. They are the ones that students in lower grades hope they will experience.

Developing units serve several important purposes including:

- They provide exciting learning experiences for students.
- They often provide real-world learning and problem solving experiences.
- They often allow students to demonstrate the way they have learned material.
- They allow for multiple types of assessments.
- They help parents understand and appreciate all that teacher do.
- They help with retention.

There five basic types of units:

- Resource units—prepared by state education departments, special interest groups, government agencies, and businesses. Some of these are wonderful resources, but all must be adapted by the classroom teacher to fit a particular classroom. We have several of these resource units.
- Teaching units—prepared by the teacher. Ideas may come from resource units, but the teacher and sometimes the students must carefully adapt the unit.

- Subject matter units—these are subsets to either resource or teaching units. They are used for a particular subject that must be taught in a linear approach. Students must master the content in one subject matter unit before moving to the next one. Math is one subject that uses these types of units.
- Experience units—these are not as planned as other units. The teacher allows learning to evolve. Students keep journals about what they are experiencing and learning. These units are difficult to define and assess.
- Integrated units—these are especially appropriate for elementary school students. These units combine several content areas—language arts, social studies, science, and others around a theme or topic such as dinosaurs.

All of you have units—the purpose of this in-service is to take what you have done and tweak it so that it is the best-designed unit you can develop. Use the following steps to help you as you continue to work. Remember these units will be used for accreditation; therefore, we will need you to provide copies of student work.

Building a Unit in Eight Easy Steps

1. Pick a topic.
2. Give the unit a title or name. If you were studying Shakespearean plays, for example, you might name your unit *The Good, The Bad, and The So-So*, or you might have a unit study of several books of the Old Testament—the title could be the same.
3. Introduce your unit.
 - a. This is where you give the rationale for teaching that unit on sound and light. Explain, in terms students can understand, why the study of this particular unit is important.
 - b. The introduction also sets the parameters and the sequence of the unit.
4. Write general objectives.
 - a. These allow the teacher to decide what basic skills students need to have before the unit begins.
 - b. These allow the teacher to decide what skills students will have when the unit ends.

- c. These allow teachers to plan pre-assessments—discussion, observation, questioning, and pre-testing.
5. Write the body.
 - a. Decide on a time line—how much time you will spend. This is an important part. You want to spend enough time to teach the general objectives (above) but not so long that students become bored or that other information is not taught.
 - b. Write a topic outline. This allows you to plan what topics on what days will be taught.
 - c. Decide what activities you would like to include in the unit.
 - i. How many will you have time to do?
 - ii. How will they be presented?
 - iii. How will they be assessed?
 - d. Write a materials list.
 - i. What will you need to teach this unit?
 - ii. What other resources will you need?
6. Decide on the evaluations or assessments.
 - a. What product will you expect of the students?
 - b. How will you know that students have learned the content?
 - c. Draft any project assignments, rubrics, or checklists.
7. Write your bibliography—what are the resources you can use as a teacher (include web sites)? What are ones students can use?
8. Write you daily lesson plans.
 - a. Using your time line as a guide—start with the first or introductory lesson.
 - b. Next, write the lesson plan for the end assessment.
 - c. Fill in the days between the two with one or two objectives for each day. Don't forget time to work on projects, read information, and discuss concepts.
 - d. Write the assessments for the unit. Finalize project assignments.
 - e. Make sure objectives and assessments match. Are you assessing what you have taught? When and where?
 - f. Write final drafts of any of the above.