



The Author Study Toolkit

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What is an author study?

An author study is a unit lesson that gives students the opportunity to delve deeply into an author's life and body of work. Whether individually, in small groups, or as a class, students can:

- Critically evaluate an author's themes, characters, and writing style
- Make connections between the author's life and work
- Make personal connections between their own experiences and those of the author and his/her characters

In addition to reading several works by an author, key components of an author study include discussion, research, and a final project.

- The Reading Rockets Author Study Toolkit will help you create a unit tailored to your instructional goals, as well as your students' interests and abilities. We suggest that you begin with "How to do an author study," a helpful checklist to get you started.



Ten reasons to do an author study

1. Help students develop their reading skills

Author studies necessarily require lots of reading, giving kids plenty of opportunities to improve their reading fluency. In addition, teachers can use author studies to individualize reading instruction by grouping students according to their reading levels and helping them choose an appropriate author to study.

2. Build critical thinking skills

With author studies, students learn to compare and contrast themes, analyze text and illustrations, and make connections between an author's life and his/her work and between the author's work and the reader's own life and work.

3. Improve writing skills

An author becomes a "writing mentor" for readers as they read and study his/her work and respond to it through a variety of writing. This "mentoring" and students' writing responses can help kids build confidence in their writing and can even inspire them to become authors themselves.

4. Forge a deeper attachment to books

Kids often bond with "their" author, which makes reading a more personal, fulfilling experience. Kids may even want to read books that influenced their author, further expanding their reading experience.

5. Establish a community of readers

Author studies help classes, and even whole schools, form closer connections through shared reading experiences.

6. Expose kids to different types of literary voices and styles

Like adults, many kids prefer a particular kind of book, such as nonfiction, series fiction, or fantasy. An author study can be used to persuade kids to branch out. In addition, some authors, including Newbery Medalists Avi and Lois Lowry, write in a variety of literary genres, which makes it easy for kids who study these authors to try out different types of reading.

7. Boost information literacy skills

A key component of author studies is researching an author's life and work, using print and online resources. This research provides a built-in opportunity for teachers to teach information literacy skills, especially how to find information sources and determine if they are credible.

8. Plug in easily to the curriculum

Teachers can do short or long author studies, depending on available time.



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9. Make connections across the curriculum

Choosing a nonfiction author is the easiest way for teachers to connect science, math, and/or history units with their language arts teaching. But these connections also can be made using elements of a fiction author's books (i.e., setting in a particular time or place, animal or historic characters).

10. Add fun to the school day!

Author studies are an entertaining way to spark students' life-long interest in reading, a particularly important factor for new readers and reluctant readers.

How to do an author study

Follow the steps in our checklist below to develop a meaningful author study unit for your students. More detail on each step is found later in this document.

Set a purpose and goals for the author study

Think about your goals for the author study. Are you trying to tie the study to a curriculum unit? Is it something extra? Setting a purpose will help you to tailor the study and clarify student expectations for the assignment.

Choose an author

This choice is crucial to student enjoyment and learning. You can develop a list of possible authors, or ask a school or public librarian for suggestions. Student polls are a good way to include students in the process.

Read and respond to the books

Decide how many books students will read and how long they have to do this reading. Encourage students to journal their responses to the readings.

Research the author(s), illustrator(s)

You'll find plenty of information in print and online, and you can ask your school librarian for advice.

Culminating projects

Culminating projects give students an opportunity to respond to what they've learned about an author. Often, these projects involve presentations to the class or to a larger audience composed of parents or other classes.



Set a purpose and goals

In *The Allure of Authors: Author Studies in the Elementary Classroom*, Carol Brennan Jenkins argues there are three main types of author studies. The first type focuses on an author study as a “literary biography,” in which students make connections between the author’s life and work. The second type of author study is based on the reader’s “critical response” to the books, focusing on an author’s themes, characters, and writing, with little or no attention to the author’s life. The third type of author study is based on the reader’s own response to the books of a particular author, focusing on books can help readers relive and reflect on events in their own lives.

While each of these types of author studies has its own merits, Jenkins urges teachers to consider pulling strands of all three types into their author studies, viewing an author study as a “multiple response.” In a multiple-response author study, students look at an author’s books as literature while also doing research about the author’s life. Finally, they reflect on how they personally respond to the author’s books.

Think about which type of study appeals to you and fits into your curriculum needs. You should also consider what you hope your students will gain from the unit. Do you want to introduce them to new authors, or develop their research or writing skills? What will their projects be? Read the “Culminating projects” section for ideas. Answering these questions will help you design an author study unit that’s just right for your class.

Choose an author

Choosing an author is a crucial task in setting up an author study and there are many facets to consider. Here are some key points to think about:

- Do you want to choose one author for the entire class to study?
- Or do you want to create student groups (perhaps based on reading ability) and have each group study a different author?
- Will you choose the author(s) to be studied, or will you give students a voice in the matter?

Including students in the selection process can be a good way to engage them, but students may be less likely to choose unfamiliar authors if they choose for themselves.

How old are your students?

If they are in early elementary school, then a picture book author might be best. A picture book author can also be a good choice for older students who are interested in illustration or if you, as the teacher, are interested in boosting your students’ visual literacy or prompting



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students' own writing. A related point: studying a picture book author might work well for reluctant or struggling readers; there are some picture book authors, such as Patricia Polacco, who tackle mature themes using the picture book format. Authors like Jacqueline Woodson, Kevin Henkes, and Jane Yolen, who write across genres and reading levels, are good choices for author studies.

Create an author study center in your classroom

- Choose a corner or other place where you can keep and display books for the author study. Or you can ask students where they think the author study center should be located.
- If you're doing a classroom-wide author study, take a tri-fold display board and decorate it with the author's name and photo. Students can add more information and more photos as they research the author.
- If students are doing different authors, you can use a tri-fold display board as a photo gallery of the authors. If you can have a computer in the author study center, students can create an online multimedia display, including websites, Facebook pages, and related resources.
- Make sure you have enough room in your center to later display work created by students as part of their author study.

Is there a special event or author visit that can coincide with your author study?

Many teachers develop author studies in conjunction with special literacy events like Poetry Month or Read Across America or with local visits that authors may be making. Check the literacy calendar at Reading Rockets for upcoming celebrations and consult your local library and reading councils for information on author visits.

What are your students' interests?

Doing a survey of your students can be a good way to determine their interests. Depending on the survey results, you might either want to follow those interests or work to expand your students' horizons (for example, by suggesting that they focus on non-fiction if they only read fiction). You also can ask students about authors they love (and why) and create a list of possibilities from those recommendations.

What genre will work best for your students and/or for your own goals for the author study?

If your students seem particularly interested in nonfiction or if you think a bit of nonfiction could stretch their reading interests — that's an obvious choice. If you're hoping to show readers the magic of creating characters, then realistic fiction might be best; if your students have vivid imaginations, fantasy could fit the bill. Keep in mind your purpose for the author study as you make your choices.



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Two practical considerations:

If you're doing a classroom author study, you'll need to either be able to read an author's books aloud to all students or have enough copies for each student. To round up enough copies, you might borrow books from the school and public library, ask parents to donate any copies they have (or give money to purchase some), ask the PTA for a grant, or ask local bookstores or even publishers to donate copies.

Most children's book authors now have websites and other biographical information may also be available online and in print. Before settling on a particular author, it's a good idea to research — or ask the librarian to research — what information is available about particular authors. Authors whose books have become movies are interesting study candidates, giving students an opportunity to compare a screen adaptation with an original text.

Create a list of authors to give students a possible starting point

Check the lists of the Caldecott and Newbery medal and honor winners. The Reading Rockets, Colorín Colorado, and AdLit.org offer a treasure trove of information about possible authors to study. Other websites to check for authors include:

- Teaching Books
<https://www.teachingbooks.net/>
- ALA's Great Websites for Kids: Authors and Illustrators
<http://gws.ala.org/category/literature-amp-languages/authors-illustrators>
- Scholastic Books and Authors
<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/books-and-authors/#authors-illustrators>

See the "Author study resources" section (pages 12-13) for places to find author lists and author information.

Read and respond to the books

Before beginning the reading, plan a unit in which you talk with students about basic literary concepts such as plot, character, and setting. You also can talk with students about the concept of literary style, as well as the idea that clues about an author often can be found in his/her work. If the author works in the picture book form, talk with students about the important balance between text and artwork. Finally, introduce students to the notion of an aesthetic response to books, suggesting that they keep track of how they themselves are feeling about what they read.



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As you begin reading, decisions you made earlier will determine how you do this segment of an author study. For example, if you're doing a classroom-wide author study, you'll need to decide when you're going to schedule read-aloud time during your day. (A great thing about author studies, though, is that they can fit into any curriculum unit.)

If you're dividing your class into different groups to study different authors or different books by the same author, you'll want to figure out how to create those groups. Or, if each student is doing his/her own author study, you'll want to try to set aside some silent reading time during the day. In the case of either group or individual reading, you'll want to have checkpoints where you can see how students are coming along in their reading.

Ask students to keep a journal as they read. The journal can be used to record facts about the author, thoughts about characters, plot and setting, and students' own reflections on issues raised by the books they are reading. The journals also are useful when students begin to research the author.

Think about whether you will require students to keep the journals for grading purposes or just for reference during their author study project(s). Think also how you will store the notebooks in the classroom. One possibility is to create storage baskets to house both the students' notebooks and the books being read.

Discussing the books being read is an important connection between reading the books and then creating responses to them. These discussions can take place in several ways:

- If students are doing group or individual author studies, ask students to write their thoughts in "dialogue journals," that you then read and record your own response.
- Older students can do a jigsaw author study with various students taking responsibility for becoming expert in a particular aspect of an author's life or work and teaching their peers. Read more about the jigsaw strategy at www.readingrockets.org/strategies/jigsaw.
- You may also want to have a whole-class debriefing after small-group or independent reading to discuss students' questions, observations, and predictions.

Whether you do a classroom, jigsaw, or small-group discussion, tell students you will be asking them to discuss in detail the books they are reading. Students should be ready to discuss: 1) literary concepts like character, plot, setting, point of view, use of imagery, metaphor, and word choice; 2) biographical clues about the author found in the books; and 3) students' own response to what they are reading. If you're studying a picture book, students should be able to discuss how the text and art work together.

This also can be a good time to have students begin to respond to the books in an even more concrete way. Perhaps they can create a graph comparing several books by an author. Or they could produce a Venn Diagram showing how the books are similar and different. Another approach is to have students



do “chunking,” which involves taking the story and breaking it into chunks of ideas or events. Other possibilities for this initial response exercise, some of which can be found in the Reading Rockets “Classroom Strategies” section, include:

- Visual imagery
 - Making story maps
 - Keeping a list of favorite characters or language that’s especially beautiful
 - Creating word “webs” or other graphic organizers
 - Illustrating their responses to books
-

Research the authors

The biggest problem you and your students may face is the overload of information available about authors, both in print and online. This is a good time to teach the class about research skills and information literacy in the media center. The librarian can help you by showing students how and where to find credible information about an author and how to properly source their research and not plagiarize.

When researching authors, it can be especially interesting to see how they have integrated their own life and experiences into their books. Remind students to look out for these connections and record them in their journals.

It’s always good to begin with basics, so check to see what the authors have written about themselves. Have they written autobiographies? Do they have websites? If an author has won a major award (Caldecott or Newbery Medal, for example), check The Horn Book website (www.Hbook.com), which annually publishes authors’ acceptance speeches. While you’ll want your students to gather further perspective from outside sources, getting an author’s own insights into his/her life is a great place to start.

Now it’s time to check with other basic sources of information. These include: biographies of the author; encyclopedias (both in print and online); and other online resources such as Teaching Books. In addition, check *Children’s Books and Their Creators* by Anita Silvey, which has alphabetically listed entries of hundreds of authors, as well as websites maintained by publishers.

Read the “Author study resources” section (pages 12-13) for many other sources of information.



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Another good source of information is newspaper and magazine article databases, if students have access to them. Students also could check Google News to see if there have been any recent articles written about the author. Teachers can check education journal databases to find articles about authors in professional journals like *The Reading Teacher*, *Language Arts*, or the *Journal of Children's Literature*.

Don't forget to check the Web for audio and video clips:

- Reading Rockets (www.readingrockets.org)
- AdLit.org (www.AdLit.org)
- Colorín Colorado (www.colorincolorado.org)

Culminating projects

Once students have read and discussed an author's books, it's time to have them demonstrate what they've learned. There are dozens of ways that students can respond to an author's work — here's a list of some great possibilities:

Create a class book based on the students' responses to the author's work

This activity is particularly well-suited for an author study the whole classroom is working on.

Create a display highlighting an author's life and work

This can be an individual, group, or classroom project. Students can include photos of the author and his/her book covers, typed quotations from the work, copies of illustrations from the books, as well as other decorative touches that show an author's focus (for example, mice for Kevin Henkes, a stack of history books for Candace Fleming, or frogs and pigs for David Wiesner).

Create a magazine

Create a magazine cover about the author, featuring his/her photograph and then headlines giving a taste of his/her books and biography. Or have students create an entire magazine with a series of articles about an author. This could work well with a group, as each student could contribute an article and collaborate on the cover.

Create a video review of an author's work

Students can use a "flip camera" or other easy-to-use video camera to record each other's reviews of an author's work. Students write the reviews first, then have them edited by the teacher. When filming the videos, students should hold up a copy of the book they are reviewing.



More culminating projects

Create a webquest

The webquest can be archived and later be used by the teacher and school media specialist as a way for future students to learn about that author.

Develop a timeline about the author

This can show biographical details as well as information about the books he/she has published. Adding photos and art to the timeline would strengthen its value and interest.

Dramatize a scene from one of the books

This is a great project for small groups. In choosing which scene to dramatize, students can display their insight into an author's work. For picture books, consider having the students create a "Reader's Theater" piece from the entire book, transforming the story into a theater script. Invite other classes to see these dramatizations, and consider scheduling a night performance for parents to attend. Video-tape the performances, if possible, to use for future classes.

Have students present their author studies to the class

Have students create some visuals — a display board, PowerPoint presentation, or even a brief skit — as they show their classmates what they've learned about an author.

Host a party based on an author's books

Invite students to dress up as characters from the books and serve food, if appropriate, that connects with the books. Obviously, this is most easily done if you've done a classroom author study. But it can be done with group or individual author studies by setting aside time for each student to make a brief presentation about their character. (A variation on this theme, taken from *The Author Studies Handbook* (Kotch) is to have a "setting" party, in which students transform the classroom into a setting from one of an author's books).

Make music

Turn some of an author's work into a musical and/or dance performance.

Create a literary social network

Have students create Facebook profiles for various characters.

Play a trivia game

This could be done "Jeopardy"-style, with someone giving the answer and student contestants vying to provide the correct question. Or create a "bingo" game using an author's characters, themes, plot, or setting.



More culminating projects

Publish a newspaper about the author

Try to have students write articles for all the different sections. For example, have them write a letter to the editor in the voice of a particular character. If there are any sports involved in an author's books, have students create sports stories about the characters. Students can even do horoscopes for characters, ads for things that characters might use or need, promos for movie or TV versions of a book, and, of course, book reviews.

Read aloud favorite passages from an author's books

This is a great way for students to practice their reading fluency.

Schedule an "author fair"

Use the display boards created by students, have them create and practice a brief speech about their author and then invite the rest of the school, parents, and others to come to the fair.

Write a fan letter to the author

This project is perfect for individual, group, or classroom author studies. Have students mention specific characters and say why they are such favorites. Or have them talk about particular themes found commonly in an author's work.

Create a comic

Students can storyboard and illustrate a graphic novel sequel or prequel to one of the author's books.

Write a letter to a character in one of the author's books

Students can create their own illustration of the character, then display the letter and the illustration on a poster board. Variation: students can write a letter to a character in the same style as the author.



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Author study resources

Books about authors/illustrators, author studies, and children's literature

- *The Allure of Authors: Author Studies in the Elementary Classroom* by Carol Brennan Jenkins
- *Nonfiction Author Studies in the Elementary Classroom* by Carol Brennan Jenkins
- *The Author Studies Handbook* by Laura Kotch and Leslie Zackman
- *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups: Why Kids Love the Books They Do* by Alison Lurie
- *Author Talk* by Leonard Marcus
- *A Caldecott Celebration* by Leonard Marcus
- *Minders of Make-Believe* by Leonard Marcus
- *Pass It Down: Five Picture Book Families Make Their Mark* by Leonard Marcus
- *Side By Side: Five Favorite Picture Book Teams Go to Work* by Leonard Marcus
- *Show Me a Story* by Leonard Marcus
- *The Wand in the Word* by Leonard Marcus
- *Ways of Telling: Conversation On the Art of the Picture Book* by Leonard Marcus
- *Children's Book-a-Day Almanac* by Anita Silvey
- *Children's Books and Their Creators* by Anita Silvey
- *100 Best Books for Children* by Anita Silvey
- *500 Great Books for Teens* by Anita Silvey

Online resources about authors and illustrators

- AdLit author interviews
<http://www.adlit.org/authors/>
- Colorín Colorado author interviews
<http://www.colorincolorado.org/videos/meet-authors>
- Reading Rockets author interviews
www.readingrockets.org/books/interviews
- Teaching Books
<https://www.teachingbooks.net/>
- Kid Lit TV
<https://kidlit.tv/>



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- ALA's Great Websites for Kids: Authors and Illustrators
<http://gws.ala.org/category/literature-amp-languages/authors-illustrators>
- Through the Looking Glass: Author and Illustrator Websites
<http://lookingglassreview.com/books/authors-illustrators/websites/>
- NBC Writers Speak to Kids
<http://www.nbclearn.com/writers-speak-to-kids>
- Kids Reads Author News and Interviews
<https://www.kidsreads.com/authors/authors.asp>
- Scholastic Books and Authors
<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/books-and-authors/#authors-illustrators>
- Random House Resources for Teachers and Librarians
<http://www.rhteacherslibrarians.com/>
- Famous Children's Authors
<https://www.biography.com/people/groups/famous-childrens-authors>
- Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Site
<http://www.carolhurst.com/authors/authors.html>
- Letters About Literature, Library of Congress Writing Contest
<http://www.read.gov/letters/>