

What Is a Unit Study?

Gail Kappenman

I first heard the term “unit study” several years ago, but hadn’t seen one until the day a client gave me a study to edit. Within minutes, my pre-conceived notions of complexity and time-consumption were banished. I realized unit studies were an incredibly flexible and interesting educational tool.

Sometimes known as integrated studies or thematic units, their popularity stems from using a hands-on learning approach. Unit studies encourage active learning skills. Teachers recognize that simply reading a textbook is the least effective method of retaining information. Reading and speaking about a topic increases the student’s retention some; reading, writing, speaking, and performing a relevant activity on a topic increases retention dramatically.

By incorporating multiple subject areas, the concepts of one topic are greatly strengthened. For example, a unit study of Cherokee Indian tribes may involve reading historical information, drawing a typical settlement picture, preparing a simple Cherokee meal, beading a traditional design pattern into a bookmark or headband, using a map to trace out the Trail of Tears, and preparing spelling lists from assigned readings. The really adventurous may create a model of the typical Cherokee home.

More than one age level may be taught using the same unit topic. Parents who are teaching more than one child find this an appealing aspect. Instead of having many lessons to prepare for each child, the parent simply expands the current unit study as needed to cover all the ages. Unit studies usually require just a few days to complete, allowing a family to cover a lot of topics in a month’s time. Children maintain interest because they are constantly doing and learning something new. The family unit is strengthened as all are working together on the same topic, helping, learning, and creating together.

Because children learn differently, (i.e. visual, auditory, and kinesthetic/tactile), a parent may allow each child to do an activity best suited to his own learning style. One child enjoys acting, so she performs a short, self-written play or skit about the pilgrims. Her brother pretends to be the mayor of a new town and writes a speech about forthcoming improvements. Their artistic sibling creates a shadowbox depicting an early settlement. Presenting the information to the rest of the family using these methods allows each child to participate in the teaching/learning process, reinforcing the subject matter in a fun and entertaining manner.

Pre-written unit studies are widely available, fairly inexpensive, and usually come loaded with ideas for a variety of ages. Some are written to an age-specific range, depending upon the topic. A quick way to find unit studies using the internet is to type in the subject, followed by the words “unit study.” (Example: American Indian unit study). Many sites offer free unit study downloads.

Creating unit studies can be quite simple and fun! For example, a basic unit study on photography might include a brief history for elementary grades. Older students require more details and should write a one-page essay, speech, or skit on famous early photographers.

Numerous drawings of old-time camera equipment can be found in libraries and on the internet. Children will enjoy drawing a picture or making a cardboard rendition of their favorite “ole-timey” camera. Assemble age-appropriate spelling lists from assigned reading materials. Create a pinhole camera as a super science project for this study. (Search “pinhole camera” on the Internet and find easy directions using common household items. Most sites will also explain how and why it works.) Kids love taking real photos with their handmade cameras! This simple unit study idea just involved history, writing, research, art, spelling, vocabulary, and science.

A final thought: many of the projects found in unit studies are easily adapted for lapbooks--another great invention for homeschoolers. In the above example, photos taken with the pinhole cameras could be included in a lapbook, as well as drawings and reports. From the Indian example, beaded bookmarks and a “pop-up” Indian dwelling could be placed in a lapbook.

Once a family begins to use unit studies, the natural versatility and flexibility of the unit study will lend themselves to many educational ideas.

Biographical Information

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Gail Kappenman is the owner of Kap & Pen Publications, www.kapandpen.com. She and her husband have been homeschooling their seven children since 1991. She loves unit studies and currently has three in print. She also edits, writes E-Books, prints Bible journals and day planners, and has authored/co-authored two books.