

Argumentative, Informative/Explanatory, and Narrative Writing

The Common Core writing standards require teachers to introduce and build on three academic forms of writing tied to specific text types and purposes in grades 6–12. Although all of the standards ask students to write arguments, informative/explanatory texts, and narratives, they do so in a variety of complexities according to the grade level.

Another skill students must develop in 6th grade onward is writing in a formal style rather than an informal style. The Common Core standards for writing in argumentative and informative/explanatory text types call for students to be able to “establish and maintain” a formal writing style. Basically, formal written English uses an objective tone; uses longer, more complex, and complete sentences with appropriate use of academic words; and avoids contractions and slang. An informal writing style typically uses a conversational or personal tone and shorter and simpler sentences, contractions, and sentence fragments and slang that students might use in spoken English. Informal writing is generally similar to how we speak and often takes on the personality of the writer. Formal writing in school can range from a list of procedures for a science lab report or a research paper, to an argumentative critique of a poem or novel. As students mature as writers they should be able to use both formal and informal writing styles to serve specific purposes for their writing.

Formal Writing Style	Informal Writing Style
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is objective in tone• Uses longer, more complex sentences• Uses academic or specialized vocabulary appropriate to the subject• Avoids contractions and slang• Adheres to grammatical and usage conventions of standard written English	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is conversational in tone; closer to spoken English• Uses simple, shorter sentences• May address the reader with second-person narrative (e.g., you)• Tends to appeal to audience• Uses contractions and may use slang

The Move to Argumentative Writing

In 6th grade, the standards introduce how to write arguments for the first time. Prior to that, grades 1–5 focus on *opinion* writing to help build a foundation for the move to argumentation. In the middle grades (6–8), the first writing standard that addresses argumentation calls for students to “Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence” (CCSS. ELA-Literacy.W.6.1). This language about accountability in argumentation was not present in the writing standards for the earlier grades. In 6th grade onward, this standard focuses on introducing arguments and organizing evidence to support a claim. Then, as students progress through 7th and 8th grade, they will learn to acknowledge alternate or opposing claims as well. By 8th grade, a student’s argumentative writing should be able to clarify the relationship not only among claims, reasons, and evidence, but also take into account counterclaims.

In grades 9–12, students delve further into arguments by supporting “claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” (CCSS. ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1). The analysis component becomes more complex as students progress through high school. In 9th and 10th grade, students should introduce arguments with evidence that establishes relationships among the claims. By grades 11 and 12, students are delineating evidence while anticipating the audience response.

The Common Core standards place a special emphasis on argumentative writing—especially the kind rooted in logical argument instead of persuasive writing that relies on emotional appeal, audience self-interest, or a writer’s reputation—as a crucial skill for students to become college- and career-ready. Because the university academic environment is largely an “argument culture,” K–12 schools should “teach the conflicts so that students are adept at understanding and engaging in arguments (both oral and written) when they enter college,” according to English and education professor

Real Students’ Real Writing

The Common Core standards’ [Appendix C: Samples of Student Writing](#) (PDF) has a variety of actual student writing from across the United States. Writing ranges from an opinion piece by a kindergartener titled “My fabit Book is do you Want to be my FRIEND,” to a 12th grader’s extended informative/explanatory essay, “In the Wake of the Spanish Lady: American Economic Resilience in the Aftermath of the Influenza Epidemic of 1918,” published in an academic journal. You can find examples from all three text types and grade levels in this appendix with annotations about how they meet Common Core standards.

Gerald Graff, who notes that only 20 percent of students entering college are properly prepared in this regard (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010b, p. 24).

Informative and Explanatory Writing

The second text type or writing genre that grades 6–12 continue to focus on is informative and explanatory texts. This form of writing continues from grades 1 to 8. According to the Common Core standards' Appendix A, informative/explanatory writing serves the following closely related purposes:

- Increases readers' knowledge of a subject
- Helps readers better understand a procedure or process
- Provides readers with an enhanced comprehension of a concept (2010b).

However, now this standard expands to include the ability to “examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.2). To achieve this standard in grades 6–8, students use compositional structures such as compare and contrast and cause and effect as well as formatting, graphics, and multimedia to aid their readers' comprehension.

Grades 9–12 include the ideas from the previous grades, but expand on them to match the audience's knowledge of the topic. Writers use quotes, extended definitions, and concrete details to support the readers' understanding.

Narrative Writing

The third writing standard in grades 6–12 continues an emphasis on narrative writing skills, as it did in the prior grades, but at increasingly complex levels. The overarching standard (i.e., the anchor standard for this topic) states that the students “Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.3).

Narrative writing can take the form of factual or fictional stories, memoirs, anecdotes, and autobiographies. Appendix A of the Common Core standards notes that narrative writing “uses time as its deep structure,” and that students can use it for many purposes, including to inform,

instruct, persuade, or entertain (2010a). In other words, narrative writing makes use of ordering actions across time, whether it's telling a fictional story with a beginning, middle, and end, or a historical account (e.g., Franklin D. Roosevelt's actions over time that culminated with the Lend-Lease Act to aid Allied nations against Nazi Germany). Even a narrative account of the procedures in a science lab experiment would be appropriate.

So, in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade, the standards ask students to organize a logical event sequence and engage the reader as they establish a context and point of view by using techniques such as dialogue, pacing, and reflection. While in high school, students must engage the reader by setting out a problem, establishing points of view, and creating a smooth progression of events and experiences.

Blending Texts Types

The Common Core standards also highlight that skilled writers may often use a blend of all three text types. For example, in Appendix C, one 12th grade student's essay about the blurred line between fiction and nonfiction literature is featured as an example of an informative/explanatory text. However, the student also uses other kinds of writing. The student not only *explains* varieties of fiction and nonfiction and the reasons readers have difficulty telling them apart, but also *argues* that a new genre has been created from the intricate combination of elements of both and inserts narrative elements (e.g., an account of how one writer who sold his memoir as truth was caught because much of it was fabricated).

The Importance of Mentor Texts

When introducing any text type, it's best to supply students with a mentor text. A mentor text is a book, piece of literature, article, poem, or song lyric—any written piece that can be used to teach a specific writing strategy or skill. The writing

Mentor Texts for Modeling and Finding Meaning

Ralph Fletcher, a writing teacher, researcher, and professional writer, defines mentor texts as "any texts that you can learn from, and every writer, no matter how skilled you are or how beginning you are, encounters and reads something that can lift and inform and infuse their own writing. I'd say anything that you can learn from—not by talking about but just looking at the actual writing itself, being used in [a] really skillful, powerful way." Listen to the [full interview with Fletcher](#).

exemplifies the strategy or skill being taught. The Common Core standards call such text “exemplars” and lists a number of them in Appendix B. However, teachers are by no means confined to using the Common Core examples and should make choices based on their own experience and understanding of what will work best for a lesson.

Newspaper and journal articles offer solid examples of introducing arguments, and plenty can be found online. Informative texts are also plentiful and readily available, but teachers should make sure the text choice matches the specific skillset that they introduce to students. For example, if the lesson focuses on organizing concepts so that each new element builds on the one it precedes, then the mentor text should clearly show that structure.

Books and longer articles are typical mentor texts. Mentor texts for writing can range from books, articles, and poetry from a variety of traditional or digital sources. Using excerpts often helps students focus on the aspect of writing that they’re learning. If the focus is on using varied transitions to link sections of a text, a teacher might show several paragraphs on a shared screen and have the students help her highlight transition words or phrases in the text.

In Appendix B, useful exemplar texts can be found for grades K–12, organized by the three main text types. The texts were chosen based on teachers’ successful use of them in classrooms and, although certainly not an exhaustive list, are recognized as having some cultural or literary value and meet the Common Core criteria for grade-level complexity and quality (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010c). The appendix also includes examples of performance tasks related to some of the listed texts, which suggest how teachers might use the exemplars as mentor texts.

For example, in the 6–8 grade band, John Adams’s “Letter on Thomas Jefferson” can be used to distinguish point of view—that of the letter writer versus his subject’s. At the grade 11–12/CCR grade band, teachers might use Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* or the *Declaration of Independence* excerpts to show students argumentative text with the claims, evidence, line of reasoning, purpose, and so on.

An Internet search will reveal many other websites that list texts that match the skills students are studying. Educators should choose texts based on what best meets their students’ needs and interests as well as what strategy works best.

Overall, the Common Core writing standards require students to write a variety of texts for different purposes, and the skills involved increase and are built on throughout each grade level. Teachers can connect students with the strategies and skills by introducing them to mentor texts throughout the writing process. These concrete examples give students a place to turn when they need guidance and support.

References

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