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Adolescent Literacy In Perspective

Writing Argument

Understanding the Core: Writing Argument
by Carol Brown Dodson

FEATURES

Learning from (and with) Expert Teachers of Argumentative Writing
by George E. Newell, Jennifer VanDerHeide, Allison Wynhoff Olsen, and the Argumentative Writing Project Team

VIGNETTES

Both Sides of the Coin: The Challenge of Teaching Argument
by Kasey Dunlap

Teaching Argumentative Writing: Argumentative Inquiry as the Basis of Good Literary Analysis
by Julie Horger

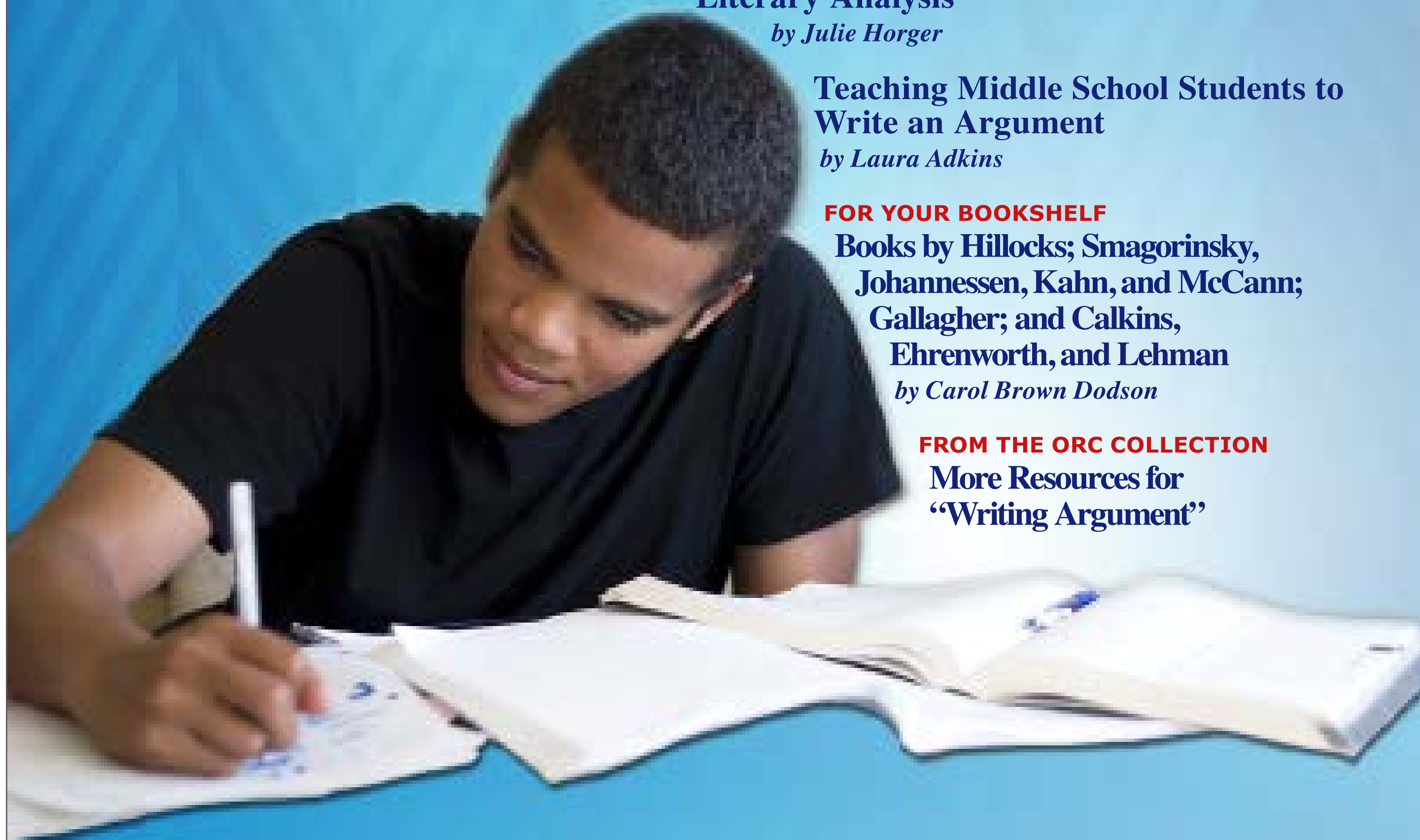
Teaching Middle School Students to Write an Argument
by Laura Adkins

FOR YOUR BOOKSHELF

Books by Hillocks; Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, and McCann; Gallagher; and Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman
by Carol Brown Dodson

FROM THE ORC COLLECTION

More Resources for "Writing Argument"



Understanding the Core: Writing Argument

by Carol Brown Dodson

If you've been trying to find out more about teaching argumentative writing, you have undoubtedly come across articles and books by George Hillocks, Jr., as well as references to his work by nearly everyone who writes about the writing process and argumentative writing. Hillocks is a distinguished researcher who shares his findings in easy-to-read, practical books and articles for teachers. Two of the writers for this issue reference his work. Teacher Julie Horger tells how reading an article by Hillocks in the *English Journal* caused her to pause and reflect on her teaching. Hillocks's article, "Teaching Argument for Critical Thinking and Writing: An Introduction," is available online as a PDF at http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/EJ0996Focus.pdf.

As a teacher of English language arts, you've probably taught your students how to write persuasively. You can still teach persuasive writing with some tweaks if you teach students in grades K–5. During each of the early grades, students are expected to engage in opinion writing and by fifth grade to provide evidence and details.

But as a teacher of grades 6–12, you can no longer rely on the persuasive writing instruction you provided in past years. The Common Core ELA standards (http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf) for grade 6 establish a major shift in text types and purposes for writing by going from W.5.1 "Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information . . ." to the first writing standard for grade 6:

> Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
>
> a. Introduce claim(s) and organize the reasons and evidence clearly.
>
> b. Support claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text . . . .

Argumentative writing becomes more sophisticated and complex through grade 12, so that by the end of grade 12, students' writing meets the demands of the anchor standard for college and career readiness. You'll see throughout this issue of *In Perspective* that the five-paragraph theme is no longer the goal. Rather, the standards lead toward writing for a real-world audience and basing the length and style of the writing on the purpose, the topic, and the audience.

In the feature article for this issue, "Learning from (and with) Expert Teachers of Argumentative Writing," Dr. George Newell suggests that "These standards offer an opportunity to rethink what counts within the high-stakes environment in which schools and teachers now function." Newell's study included high school teachers from central Ohio who were selected for their expertise in teaching writing. He shares the stories of three of the teachers through a discussion of their beliefs about the teaching of writing and their methods for teaching argumentative writing.

The three classroom vignettes, respectively, written by a language arts specialist who cotaught a class, a high school teacher, and a middle school teacher, allow you to look into their classrooms and see what they are teaching.

- English language arts specialist Kasey Dunlap addresses the difference between persuasive and argumentative writing and shares how she collaborated with a classroom teacher and cotaught a lesson on argument. Dunlap explains the lesson in detail and includes the chart she created to help students look at claims and counterclaims in their argument.
- High school English teacher Julie Horger shares how she was inspired by reading an NCTE *English Journal* article in which George Hillocks, Jr., explained how argumentative writing can be taught. Horger used the information from the article to make changes in her teaching of literature and writing in an Advanced Placement class. Her careful explanation will have you using her ideas in your classroom.
- Sixth grade teacher Laura Adkins explains how she taught a unit on persuasion to move her students from opinion writing to argument writing. Her detailed description includes the prewriting activities, the research, and the overall writing process.

You will definitely want to read this issue from cover to cover and to share some of the articles with your colleagues. As you are implementing the Common Core standards, you might want to bookmark some of these articles for later use.

How do you teach argumentative writing? Please share what you do by commenting on the ORC Language Arts blog (http://communities.ohiorc.org/language-arts-blog/).

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Join the Conversation

Engage with other educators and find additional information and links to new resources at the Language Arts blog and on twitter.

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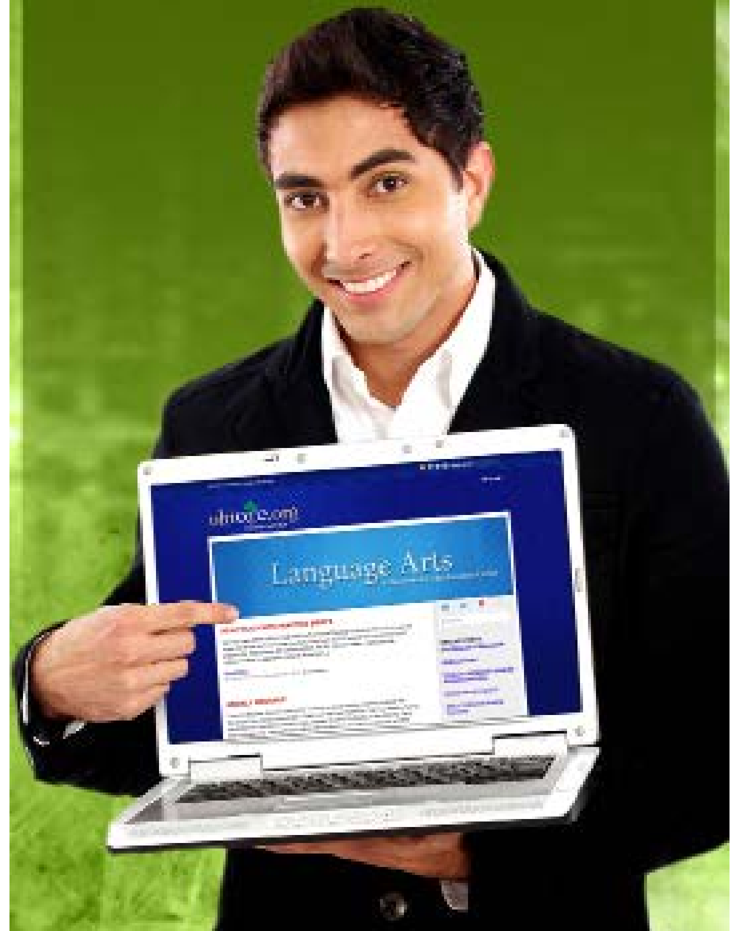


Learning from (and with) Expert Teachers of Argumentative Writing

by George E. Newell, Jennifer VanDerHeide, Allison Wynhoff Olsen, and the Argumentative Writing Project Team

A New Role for Argumentative Writing

George Hillocks (2005) has described the teaching of writing as "focused almost exclusively and to the point of obsession on teaching the forms of writing—the parts of paragraphs, the parts of essays, the structure of sentences, the elements of style, and so forth" (p. 238). So it is no surprise in this time of Common Core standards and increasing accountability measures that many teachers make the easy assumption that teaching formal, academic writing such as argumentation must follow the prescriptions of form—or what is often referred to as the "five-paragraph theme." This familiar model essay includes five paragraphs, labeled with the classic five paragraph parts: introduction, three topic or body paragraphs, and conclusion. However, there is another way to regard the Common Core standards, with their recognition of argumentative writing as a central strand comparable to reading in the teaching of English language arts. These standards offer an opportunity to rethink what counts within the high-stakes environment in which schools and teachers now function.

We think that locating the teaching and learning of argumentative writing within the curriculum may provide one avenue for rethinking the role of writing in all content areas. For "argument is a basic structure of discourse that filters everything we speak or write [and] may take one of several forms, but at the same time they are infinitely malleable" (Hillocks, 1995, p. 129). However, a more fundamental issue is the role of teachers' epistemologies or beliefs regarding what role argumentative writing has in learning, how such writing might be taught, and how students learn to write arguments. In addition, we believe that teachers who are able to adapt and perhaps modify their epistemologies about the role of argument according to classroom situations are more likely to be effective in teaching "high literacy" such as argumentative writing. In these classrooms, students gain not merely the basic literacy skills to get by, but also the content knowledge, ways of structuring and developing ideas, and ways of communicating with others that are considered the marks of an educated person (Langer, 2002).

Defining Argumentative Writing

We define argumentative writing as a type of critical thinking and rhetorical production involving the identification of a thesis (also called a claim), supportive evidence (empirical or experiential), and assessment of the warrants that connect the thesis, evidence, and situation within which the argument is being made. Argumentative writing must be predictive of counterarguments accompanied by responses that are respectful of diverse views within a heterogeneous society. Consistent with the 2002 RAND report and studies of reading and writing in the workplace (see MacKinnon, 1993; Smart, 1993; Yeh, 1998), argumentative writing is critical for academic and economic success. As Graff argues in *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (2003), "For American students to do better—all of them, not just twenty percent—they need to know that summarization and making arguments is the name of the game in academia" (p. 3).

Three Epistemologies for Adaptive Expertise in the Teaching of Argumentative Writing

In this article we want to offer a vision of what it means to teach argumentative writing based on the findings from a study of high school ELA teachers in central Ohio who were selected for their expertise as writing teachers. As part of a larger study of teaching and learning argumentative writing, we used case study methods to collect data in over 30 ELA teachers' classrooms, in two stages. During the first stage, we observed and video-recorded teaching argumentative writing during an instructional unit. During stage two we interviewed the teachers about the unit and about their students' writing. For purposes of this article, we selected three teachers—two from an urban school district and one from a suburban school district—who emerged as some of the "adaptive experts" (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 2000) we observed teaching argumentative writing. These teachers—Kate, Janice, and Frances*—developed instructional

approaches based on the kinds of students they were teaching, including what their students knew about argumentative writing.

The three teachers were able to consider their knowledge of argumentation on the one hand and their understandings of what challenges their students might encounter with argumentative writing on the other. For instance, during an interview, Frances commented, "When I start the school year, I know that my students will have certain ideas about formal writing, so I take some time to figure that out and start making adjustments." Although all the ELA teachers we studied were concerned with the form or structure of student writing, our observations of these three expert teachers' instructional units allowed us to study their decision making that was shaped by multiple considerations beyond essay form, not the least of which was their concern for their students' efforts to communicate and analyze their ideas and experiences. While Kate focused on the form or structure of an argumentative essay when teaching ninth graders, Frances was more concerned with the social (and sometimes political) processes of argumentation that she believed would serve her eleventh graders in life beyond school. Janice, whose twelfth grade students had, in her judgment, moved beyond structural issues, supported their efforts to develop new literary understandings and interpretations through discussion and debate.

Respectively, we have named these differing "argumentative epistemologies"† *structural-textual*, *ideational*, and *social practices* based on Halliday's (1970) three meta-functions for language. When we present at professional conferences, teachers often ask which is the most effective "approach"—a reasonable question when so much is demanded of high school writing teachers. Our response is that teachers with adaptive expertise answer this question, based not on what always works best, but on what works best for the students that they teach. To extend this a bit more, these teachers think about what is appropriate given the unique intersection that their classrooms provide for their many and varied students; their beliefs about teaching and learning; the materials available for them to use; and the public, professional, and policy contexts in which they teach. What follows is a description of each of these argumentative epistemologies and related practices that have emerged from our analysis of these teachers and their instructional contexts.

Argument as Structure or Form

Kate had taught in an urban high school for 15 years and was the chair of the English department. Our analyses suggested that she had a structural-textual epistemology for teaching argumentative writing. That is, her instruction focused on supporting her ninth grade students' understandings of the elements of argumentative writing, particularly claim and evidence (Toulmin, 1958). Kate used classroom discussions to practice the orchestration and integration of these elements in the students' writing by relying on verbal arguments. Because her students had just begun high school and academic-analytic writing, Kate wanted to provide a discourse structure that they might transfer into other classrooms as they moved through high school. Because she knew her ELA colleagues did not always teach formal academic argument and because she regarded her ninth grade humanities course an academic gateway, she committed herself to teaching her students the predictable and inherited discourse structures and argumentative terminology that the students' future teachers will expect to see in their writing.

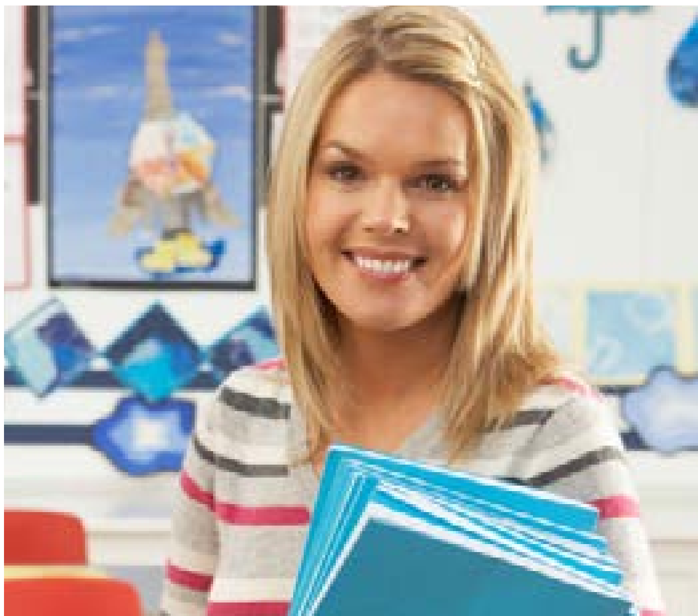
Argument as Ideational

Janice's position as an Advanced Placement English literature and composition teacher in her suburban high school, while grounded in maintaining her school's academic reputation, is also quite different from Kate's, especially in light of the community context of the school. Janice's high school is located in a wealthy, suburban community that, while supportive, also has high expectations for the students' academic success. Unlike Kate's department, however, Janice's colleagues had a cohesiveness that may be explained by the leadership of a department chair who considered argumentative writing a primary tool for academic success and a centerpiece of the ELA program. Janice's colleagues agreed about the value of maintaining a high priority not only for teaching argumentative writing, but also for working programmatically to strengthen how it was taught and learned across all four grade levels. Consequently, when we observed Janice teaching twelfth grade AP literature, she assumed that her students had appropriated the vocabulary and the academic practices associated with argumentative/analytic writing about literature. Thus, Janice was able to foreground argumentation and literary interpretation as tools that students used to develop ideas rather than the

particular structural elements that were evident in Kate's teaching and interviews about argumentative writing instruction.

Argument as a Social Practice

Frances taught ELA in an urban high school in the same city and school district as Kate. Unlike Kate, though, sh did not teach in a school that had the the same academic reputation to maintain. And unlike Janice, she did not enjoy the support of and interaction with ELA colleagues for two reasons: (1) the school district's professional development program was focused on raising students' statewide tests scores, and (2) the classrooms of ELA teachers were distributed across the school, leading to a degree of isolation for Frances. Although Frances's college prep eleventh grade students had limited experience with argumentative writing, she believed that argumentation provided them with an opportunity "to think before they write." Frances's teaching illustrated a social-political epistemology in that she wanted her students to learn "how to argue for themselves thoughtfully and passionately as part of their lives." However, she insisted that rather than teaching writing skills as part of argumentation, she needed to provide support for talk and debate so that "they will become interested in learning to write arguments." For example, Frances's instructional unit focused on social issues such as bullying among peers which, we think, fostered thoughtful and reasoned discussions. When we asked Frances to comment on the quality of her students' writing, she stated, "They can and will do better, but what's important now is that they got excited about expressing their opinions on important social issues."



Going Forward: Some Final Thoughts

Many school districts in Ohio and around the country have been conducting in-service programs to prepare for the implementation of the Common Core standards, including the teaching of argumentative writing. Although this has not been the centerpiece of our project, we have considered how ELA teachers might learn new practices. Our study of how teachers with adaptive expertise for writing instruction apply argumentative epistemologies to support their students suggests the importance of not only the resources and talents of individual teachers but also the value of their teaching experiences with students of varying levels of academic success and the influence of school and departmental contexts in which writing instruction is valued and practiced. Put another way, our research suggests that school and departmental contexts in which teachers work play important roles in shaping and sustaining beliefs, expertise, and practices—it may be that changing the social contexts of teachers' practices can be more influential than focusing on individual teachers who do not have access to the experiences and ideas of their colleagues. For example, throughout our argumentative writing project we have asked teachers to gather at least once an academic term to share their practices with one another in the spirit of collegiality and professionalism. We are not sure if these gatherings have fostered new approaches to argumentative writing, but the numbers of teachers attending the Teacher Study Group meetings have been increasing over time. One reason, we think, is that the teachers who have presented their practices at the meeting have become bolder and better teachers of argumentation.

We also want to emphasize that although the three teachers profiled in this essay were selected by school administrators and educational professionals for their effectiveness as writing teachers, their local reputations were more a result of how well they adapted or shaped their teaching according to their own deep understanding of their students' strengths and shortcomings as writers rather than their knowledge of a single "best practice." Put another way, these teachers' adaptations are not just nice but necessary given the variations in their students' skills, knowledge, and dispositions toward academic writing and argumentation. Perhaps the most intriguing finding from our studies of expert writing teachers is not that a particular argumentative epistemology is better than another. Rather that there is a substantial advantage for teachers to develop more than one argumentative epistemology such that students of different backgrounds, interests, and literacy practices are offered multiple possibilities for learning argumentative writing.

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*All references to teachers are pseudonyms.

†We are defining an *argumentative epistemology* as a constellation of beliefs about argument writing, beliefs about learning such writing, ways of talking about argumentation, and the sorts of approaches to teaching and assessment that are likely to be associated with these beliefs.

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Both Sides of the Coin: The Challenge of Teaching Argument

by Kasey Dunlap

Argument writing is one of the most important shifts in the CCSS. In the past, the focus has been on persuasion—but they are not the same thing. Persuasion often relies on emotions or feelings to support a thesis; argument relies on facts and information. And while the purpose of persuasion is traditionally to sway an audience into doing or believing something, argument is centered on logical appeals which ask the reader to think critically about the claims presented.

In grades 11 and 12, students are expected to write arguments that (I've added the italics):

a. Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), *distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims*, and create an organization that logically sequences the claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

b. Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant data and evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both claim(s) and counterclaims in a discipline-appropriate form that anticipates the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases.

The difficulty in teaching argument for most teachers is in training students to examine an issue fairly rather than simply picking a side and sticking to it. How can we elevate student thinking beyond one-sided opinions? A colleague of mine was struggling with just this question while teaching Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, so we collaborated on a lesson to encourage students to think deeply about the characters from more than one perspective.

We took advantage of the students' strong reaction to Lady Macbeth to challenge their assumptions. The teacher began by explaining that they would be writing a literary analysis focused on Lady Macbeth, but that the essay would have a twist to it: instead of simply arguing whether Lady Macbeth was evil or just misunderstood, their essay would have to present both sides of the issue.

I introduced myself and stated that Lady Macbeth was one of my favorite characters in all of literature. I claimed that I felt she got a bad rap and really wasn't so bad. The students (high school juniors) thought I was crazy myself! Their teacher took the opposing view, and we modeled a conversation about the character. By playing the devil's advocate, I could see that I was winning over a few students to consider my point of view.

We proceeded to look at some key events in the play and discussed how—depending on the reasoning one used—the same evidence could support different claims. Together, we began to complete a chart to record our thinking (see Chart 1). By asking them to look at all the evidence and consider how it could support both claims, it encouraged students to read more carefully. They were no longer just looking for proof of their own ideas, but examining opposing views as well.

One of the first pieces of evidence we examined was the famous "unsex me now" speech that Lady Macbeth delivers in Act 1. Students immediately wanted to put that in the evil column. However, after I pointed out that she had to ask to be made evil and asked "Doesn't this support the claim that she is not evil?" I persisted in my claim that she is merely misunderstood. "Why would you have to ask for a quality you already possessed?" The room became noticeably quieter as the students thought about this. Several students offered a timid "I can kind of see that . . ." aha! They were beginning to reconsider their first reactions and think more deeply about the character of Lady Macbeth. We (the teacher and I) continued a friendly debate about Lady Macbeth, recording a few of our own ideas as well as coaxing more out of the students.

At this point, the students, working in small groups, were assigned a perspective and asked to look for more evidence throughout the play. We emphasized the importance of recording their reasoning along with evidence. Toward the end of the class, students shared evidence on both sides of the issue so that everyone would have plenty of material for an in-class essay on the following day. Through this activity, the students began to see that their claim was

Lady Macbeth is evil.		Lady Macbeth is misunderstood.
REASONING	**EVIDENCE**	**REASONING**
She is already evil and wants to be even more evil. If she wasn't evil, she wouldn't think of asking for more evilness. She knew she was going to do something really evil.	*She asks the spirits to "unsex me here, And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty!" She wants to be evil!*	*She isn't evil enough to do what must be done—she needs external forces to MAKE her evil. Why would you ask for something that you already had? So, she wasn't really evil.*
Your primary claim is . . . Because (summary of evidence and reasoning) . . .		

Chart 1.

less important than their evidence and reasoning—which was, of course, the main point of the activity. The next day, as students sat down with text and notes in hand to write the essay, the teacher asked them to look under their desks to see if there was a red sticker. Those with the sticker would be writing from the perspective of defending Lady Macbeth. Others would be writing to support the claim that she was, in fact, an evil character. All students were required to include opposing pieces of evidence and refute them in their essay, so that while the essay would favor one side of the issue, they still had to consider alternative views. After the moans and groans subsided (some students were not prepared to switch sides), students got to work quickly and were able to produce essays that reflected a deeper thinking about the topic. Several students wrote that the process of examining all the evidence from both perspectives actually caused them to change their minds about Lady Macbeth. One student even suggested that while it was easy to see Lady Macbeth as an evil character, it required more sophisticated thinking to support an opposing view.

In the end, the students were more confident about what they had written. The teacher and I were pleasantly surprised not only that most essays were well written, but that so many students used metacognitive strategies to reflect on their thinking and writing—an added bonus! These students are now using the language of argument frequently in class. "How do you know that?" "What is your reason for saying that?" "How does that prove anything?" These questions are becoming more common during class discussions. Reasoning is replacing endless lists of disconnected evidence in their writing. While the students have not

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Teaching Argumentative Writing: Argumentative Inquiry as the Basis of Good Literary Analysis

by Julie Horger

Three years ago, I read an article that significantly influenced how I approach argumentative writing in my classroom: George Hillocks's "Teaching Argument for Critical Thinking and Writing: An Introduction" in the July 2010 issue of *English Journal*. As Hillocks outlined the role of critical thinking in argumentative writing and offered his own experience teaching forensic argument to high school students, he offered an insight that made me pause and reflect on my approach to teaching argumentative writing. He writes:

> Although many teachers begin to teach some version of argument with the writing of a thesis statement, in reality, good argument begins with looking at the data that are likely to become the evidence in an argument that give rise to a thesis statement or major claim. A thesis statement arises from a question, which in turn rises from the examination of information or data of some sort . . . *the process of working through an argument is the process of inquiry*. At its beginning is the examination of data, not the invention of a thesis statement in a vacuum. (p. 26)

Even though the Hillocks article isn't focused on argument in the form of literary analysis, this passage resonated with me when I considered it within the context of my AP English Literature and Composition class. What Hillocks suggests has in fact been my long-standing approach to class discussion of literature with my seniors in this course. Our discussion—whether it is of poetry, drama, or fiction—focuses entirely on close reading, "unpacking" the meaning of literature by analyzing detail and literary devices. So our discussion begins with the "data," as Hillocks suggests. Looking at the "data" of the piece of literature, then, moves organically to questions of interpretation: "How does the cacophonous language of Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' reinforce the poem's purpose?" or "How does the physical and historical setting in Graham Greene's 'The Destructors' influence the characters' actions?" Only then do we begin to move toward conclusions that could become thesis statements. My approach to discussion, then, matches what Hillocks suggests.

And yet, I realized, when I would ask students to develop arguments for their literary analysis papers, I asked them to move in the opposite direction. Why? Likely because that is what I had always been taught: start with the thesis, then generate supporting arguments, then look for evidence that backs up the arguments. So I began to wonder if these conflicting approaches accounted for my satisfaction with the quality of our class discussions and my general dissatisfaction with the quality of the literary argument papers I would receive from students. Too often, the students' papers had arguments that didn't match their thesis statements, or the supporting evidence was too thin, or the reasoning was illogical. I wondered if this was at least partly because when they were developing the ideas for their papers, they were starting with the thesis and moving to the data, rather than the other way around. So I decided to turn this process around, as Hillocks suggests, and I tried this new approach with the literary argument paper with which my students were usually least successful: the literary analysis of a short story.

The short story unit in my AP English literature class usually falls at about the halfway point of the course; we have spent the first part of the course focused on the analysis of poetry, followed by the study of a Shakespeare play. As a segue to our study of fiction, the short story unit serves as a review for my seniors of the act of closely reading prose, and each day we discuss a different short story within the context of a particular literary device. We might, for example, focus on the characterization in Tobias Wolff's "Hunters in the Snow," or the role of setting in Graham Greene's "The Destructors," or the significance of the potential symbols and allusions in T. C. Boyle's "Greasy Lake." Students must come to class having prepared for discussion by writing an informal journal, in which I encourage them to begin "testing out" text-based analytical assertions that they can then propose in class discussion. At the end of the unit, students must write an argumentative paper asserting an original literary analysis of one of the short stories we discussed, though they are free to analyze any elements of the text, not just those we focused on in our discussion.

The Role of Informal Writing, Speaking, and Listening in Developing Argumentative Skills

Just as Hillocks notes that a thesis statement should not be generated in a vacuum, the high school English classroom should not be focused on argumentation only when it comes time to write a formal paper. Rather, the classroom must be focused on developing students' argumentative skills every day. To this end, students in my AP English literature class must complete some form of writing to accompany each reading assignment, whether it is an informal journal in which they begin making text-based assertions or a double-sided "dialectical journal" that requires them to note significant text on the left side of the page and make an interpretive point to accompany it on the right side. Obviously, this forces them to begin to pull together analytical points and see patterns in the text, but it also yields more fruitful class discussion, as students come to class not only with ideas to propose for discussion but with specific textual evidence to wield as they make their arguments.

As a result, I am usually able to open class discussion with a general question such as "What did you notice about the setting in this story?" or "What did you notice about how the author develops the characters?" so we are looking at the specific details of the text to begin. The students are able to begin "test-driving" their analytical points, knowing that they have to back up their arguments with evidence from the text and reasoning to connect the evidence to their assertion. The students often build on each other's ideas—acknowledging, perhaps, that they came to the same conclusion and offering additional evidence. They also challenge each other's ideas, offering evidence to the contrary or suggesting flaws in reasoning. I find it can be helpful at the end of the period to ask the students to take a few moments to add to the bottom of that day's journal anything from the discussion that they found particularly worthwhile, ideas of their own that they have since reconsidered, or assertions a classmate suggested that they had not before considered. I collect each day's journal randomly for periodic checks, both to make sure students' understanding is on the right track and to make sure they are actually doing the work.

Developing the Literary Analysis Argument

This daily practice with argumentation comes together more formally once we have read and discussed all the stories in the form of a literary analysis paper. I tell them they are going to develop an interpretive assertion about one of the stories, analyzing one or more of the story's literary devices within the context of the work as a whole. My process prior to reading the Hillocks article was to share examples of thesis statements and then send the students back to a story of their choice for additional close readings to develop a first draft of their paper. Now, thanks to Hillocks, my introduction to this argumentative paper walks students through very specific steps they should take to develop their analysis.

To begin, I actually share the earlier Hillocks quote with my students, asking them to unpack what he is saying. We discuss how this applies to the analysis of literature, and I ask them what data they must examine ("The details of the story") and how his approach is different from what they might be used to ("We're used to starting with a thesis statement and then finding the evidence to support it"). I emphasize that I want them to think of this assignment as an inquiry into how meaning is created in the story, looking at the details and allowing an argument to rise out of it, rather than the other way around.

To that end, I lay out the following steps for the students, based on Hillocks's approach, to generate their arguments:

1. I have students choose a favorite story to reread multiple times and ask them to annotate the significant details, paying particular attention to such issues as syntax, character development, the role of point of view, setting, symbol, allusion, and tone. I suggest that if they are overwhelmed by looking for all these elements at the same time, they can take a "layered" approach, rereading for each literary element one at a time

2. Having reread the stories multiple times for the details—or their "data"—the students should then look for patterns and connections that might lead to possible analytical questions. For example, the details and patterns they notice may suggest such questions as "How does the characterization of the Das family establish the tone in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies'?" or "In Tobias Wolff's

'The Rich Brother," is Webster a devil figure, and if he is, how does that contribute to the meaning of the story as a whole?"

3. I suggest that they then use one of these questions as a lens for even further close reading of the story, looking at what the details in the story begin to suggest as possible answers. Having collected and analyzed the data, the students can then develop a thesis statement.

I warn students that this multistep process I have outlined for them is where the most difficult work for their argument paper takes place—what I call the "intellectual heavy lifting"—and that it will take sustained effort over many days to work through it. I am trying to move them away from thinking about argumentation as the act of sitting down to write a paper the night before it is due. It is instead an ongoing "process of inquiry" that begins with our class discussions and continues with their individual work, closely reading the text and seeing where the details that they find lead them.

Once they have done this thinking, I ask students to develop a proposal of their ideas. Some members of our department have adopted this idea of the proposal—as opposed to an outline or first draft—thanks to our former department chair, Dr. Eileen McMahon. Dr. McMahon's use of a "proposal" in her classroom appealed to me because it emphasizes students' ideas, rather than just the organization of their main points, as an outline too often yields. While members of our department use the proposal idea in different ways—some requiring more specific structure or varying numbers of proposals—I ask students to develop a proposal in any format that works for them, as long as it explains the thesis, supporting arguments, direct evidence from the text, and commentary that connects the evidence to their thesis. If they take this seriously, they will have much of the thinking for their paper completed at this point.

Over the next few weeks, students will continue to hone their arguments. They first receive feedback from their peers, when I place the students in small groups and ask them to "pitch" their ideas. They revise and continue to develop their arguments before receiving written feedback from me. As they begin to shape their ideas into a formal paper, the students often schedule conferences with me for additional feedback.

Conclusion

Moving from data to questions to thesis can seem counterintuitive and even unsettling to students at first, but when I have asked them to reflect on the process, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. One of my seniors, Camille, said it was "tremendously helpful," as it "is much more organic and helped me [avoid] formulating a forced argument." Another student, Carlin, also recognized the organic nature of this process, writing, "By gathering evidence first, my thesis crafted itself. Usually I find myself writing a thesis too early and end up feeling pressured to cram in evidence where it may not fit." And one student, Nan, recognized an additional benefit: "I was pleasantly surprised that by the time I had come up with my claim I already had my evidence."

No pedagogical process is perfect, but in the three years I have used this approach, I find that students have been able to generate more cohesive and coherent arguments about literature. I also find that approaching literary analysis as a data-driven inquiry emphasizes the critical thinking and the process of honing an argument over the final product. While having my students produce well-written, polished papers is certainly important, it is also critical that we not lose sight of the argumentative inquiry that is the basis of good argumentative writing.

Reference

Hillocks, Jr., George. (2010). "Teaching Argument for Critical Thinking and Writing: An Introduction," *English Journal,* vol. 99, no. 6, pp. 24–32.

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Teaching Middle School Students to Write an Argument

by Laura Adkins

Middle school students are, at their core, argumentative. They argue with their parents. They argue with their teachers. They argue with each other. The question remains, though—how do we, as language arts teachers, help them to form and write arguments that are well grounded and meaningful? How do we help them to understand that they must value and consider the opinions of others when making their arguments? How do we help them research and find information that will be suitable for their topics?

As I plan my units for my sixth grade language arts students, I always ask myself the following question: "How can I structure this unit in a way that will lead students to create an authentic final product?" I asked myself this question when planning our recent unit on persuasive writing and found myself with a plethora of answers.

Write What You Know

One of my first answers to the question of authenticity was that students must write what they know. If I were to assign them topics, I was sure that they would be able to complete the task of writing an argument about the topic. However, I determined that they would be much more likely to find the best way to argue their topic if they were writing about ideas in which they actually had some vested interest. And so during one of the first class periods of our persuasive writing unit, we spent 20 minutes brainstorming all the issues that the students face on a daily basis—at home, at school, and during extracurricular activities.

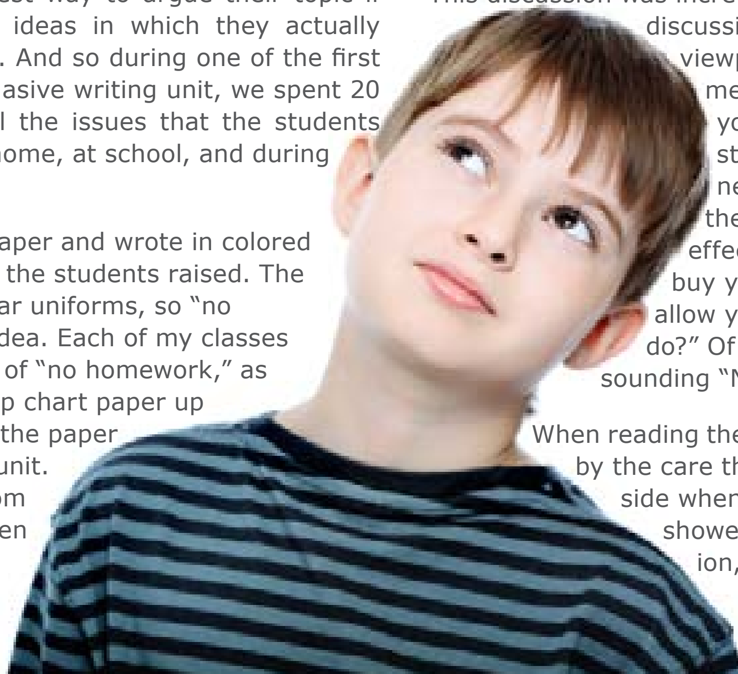
We used giant flip chart paper and wrote in colored markers all the ideas that the students raised. The students in our school wear uniforms, so "no uniforms" was a popular idea. Each of my classes had topics along the lines of "no homework," as well. We then stuck the flip chart paper up around the room and left the paper up throughout the entire unit. Students could choose from any of the ideas listed, even if the idea came from another class. Using this method, I still had some control over the topics, but the students had some choice in the matter as well.

How Do I Argue My Point?

For the next step, we used the giant flip chart paper again. We brainstormed all the ways that students use persuasion currently in their lives. I asked the students, "When you want your parents to buy you a new game or toy, how do you convince them?" The ideas poured out. Many of the thoughts that students shared related to "softening their parents up" or "waiting until they were in a good mood." For example, students would first complete all their chores without being asked and then ask the parents. Another popular strategy was to try to bribe their parents. For instance, a student would promise to do extra chores or be nicer to a sibling if his parents would buy him a phone.

Aside from being extremely fun, this discussion led us into the rebuttal aspect of argument writing. When asked how we could apply these techniques to their own writing, students discussed how they needed to consider the opposing side of the argument when presenting their side. This discussion was incredibly useful, because it led to a discussion of valuing the opposing viewpoint when presenting an argument. I asked the students, "If you told your parents, 'You are stupid if you don't buy me this new game,' do you think that they will buy it for you? Is that an effective way to convince them to buy you something you want or allow you to do something you wish to do?" Of course, the answer was a resounding "NO!"

When reading their final papers, I was impressed by the care the students gave to the other side when writing the essay. They showed real value for the other opinion, while still arguing against it.



Mentor Texts

We looked at two persuasive essays as mentor texts. As a class, we analyzed the texts, asking the questions:

What is the author's argument?

What position does the author take (for or against)?

What is one point that supports the author's argument?

What evidence does the author give to support this point?

What is the point of view of the author?

We also studied a few famous persuasive speeches, such as Susan B. Anthony's speech at her trial and Mark Antony's famous lines from *Julius Caesar* ("Friends, Romans, countrymen . . .").

Consensus

As a class, we used the flip chart paper one more time and talked about the requirements for the final piece of writing. I asked the students to list all the qualities of an "A" essay for me, and I wrote their responses on the flip chart paper, which I hung around the room near other flip chart pages. After the class agreed on the criteria, I created my rubric for the essay directly from the flip chart paper!

Research

Each week, we researched evidence during our time in the library. The biggest hurdle for me was teaching the students how to do research. Most of the students were incredibly hesitant to read an entire article in order to discover whether or not it was relevant to their topic.

In order to overcome this barrier, I invited a civil attorney to speak to the class. Our attorney talked about her cases and the use of persuasion in her daily work. And she spoke about the importance of valuing the other side of the argument. However, I mainly asked her to focus on the amount of reading she must accomplish in order to prepare for court. She regaled the students with stories of hours and days spent in the library. She explained that she would spend an hour reading an old case to see if she could cite it in court only to find that it was worthless to her. Of course, the students were horrified!

This perspective helped them understand that spending five minutes reading an article is not so bad after all!

The Writing Process

We spent a good deal of time talking about their thesis statements. One of the main points that I wanted them to understand was that they needed to take a clear, definite position on an issue. We held a writing workshop to examine each student's thesis statement. We analyzed and questioned each thesis statement until each student had an acceptable statement. This activity was time-consuming, but I believe it was worth every second.

Students brainstormed three pros and three cons related to their theses. Then they created outlines using their theses and the best points that they had garnered from their research. Students brought their materials together and wrote their first drafts. After students finished the first draft, we had a peer review day. Before completing the peer reviews, we held another discussion about how to craft constructive comments on a peer review. Once the students completed peer reviews, they edited their first drafts and brought the second drafts for a second peer review. After completing the second peer review, students were able to edit once more before turning in the final draft. I asked students to attach all their writing to the final draft—that included the brainstorm, outline, first draft and peer review, second draft and peer review, and the final draft with a bibliography. The final product was massive! It was helpful for me to see the entire writing process, though, as well as the peer reviews.

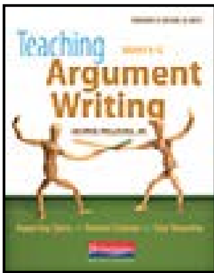
The unit took approximately four weeks to complete. The students were engaged, and the final products were interesting and fun to read! I enjoyed teaching this unit and found that creating consensus, helping students see the real-life application of what they were doing, and relating the assignment to issues that currently faced them helped the unit to be enjoyable for the students, as well.

Laura Adkins teaches sixth grade language arts at the Summit Country Day School in Cincinnati.

For Your Bookshelf

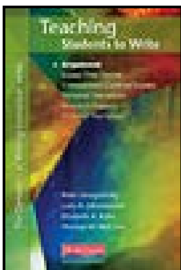
Books by Hillocks; Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, and McCann; Gallagher; and Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman

by Carol Brown Dodson



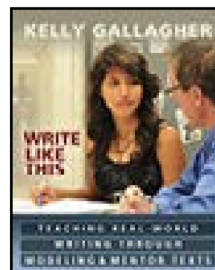
Teaching Argument Writing, Grades 6–12, by George Hillocks, Jr. (Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 2011)

A sixth grade teacher at a recent conference told me how she is using this book. After stating that she loves the author, she explained that she is following his suggestions and activities exactly as they are presented in the book. Because her students are learning so much and doing so well with the first section, she plans to continue to use this book as she works with her sixth graders. If you read the preface, many of your questions about teaching argument writing will be answered. Hillocks explains the difference between persuasion and argument, then presents and explains the elements of argument. The author addresses the flow of effective teaching and learning in the introduction, from clarity and specificity of goals and objectives to appropriate task complexity and clear feedback. The rest of the book is filled with effective, research-based strategies, case studies, and tips for using the strategies with students. Hillocks does a masterful job of combining the research about teaching writing with practical classroom application. *Teaching Argument Writing* is a must-read book for every teacher of writing, regardless of the content area.



Teaching Students to Write: Argument, by Peter Smagorinsky, Larry R. Johannessen, Elizabeth A. Kahn, and Thomas M. McCann (Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 2011)

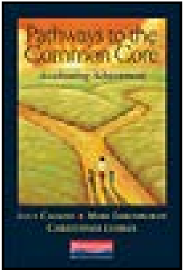
This book is the first of a series of small books that address the types of writing found in the Common Core Standards. The writers use research and practice by George Hillocks, Jr., on "structured process" in the many classroom activities and lessons they share with middle and high school teachers. According to the authors, "the first four chapters show you how to teach students to write arguments using structured process instruction." They describe teaching strategies, provide a sequence of activities and handouts, and share examples of student work. In the final chapter, the authors explain how the activities and lessons make their work a structured process approach and help you to design additional lessons. Ten principles of a structured process approach are followed by a discussion of two key ideas, environmental teaching and inquiry instruction, that guide the teaching of writing. The practical, classroom-based strategies, activities, and student writing samples will help you get started as you shift your students' writing from opinion and persuasion to argument. The suggestions for "where you go from here" provide you with methods for constructing your own process for designing structured process instruction based on your students and their work.



Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing Through Modeling & Mentor Texts, by Kelly Gallagher (Stenhouse Publishers, Portland, ME, 2011)

Write Like This is built around Gallagher's premise that if students are to grow as writers, they need to read and study good writing, and they need to emulate good writers. Gallagher emphasizes real-world writing purposes, the kind of writing he wants his students to be doing 20 years from now. Each chapter focuses on a specific discourse: express and reflect, inform and explain, evaluate and judge, inquire and explore, analyze and interpret, and take a stand/propose a solution. Since you're working with argumentation, you might be tempted to go directly to Chapter 7, "Take a Stand/Propose a Solution." If you go there, you'll find worthwhile and engaging ideas and methods for helping your students write arguments. The author provides a four-square argument chart and explains, with examples, how to use the chart with your students. The student examples and Gallagher's commentary show just how useful the chart can be. The classroom dialogue clarifies how the strategy works in the classroom. As you read the chapter, you'll start making notes so you can apply some of the writer's strategies to your lessons on writing argument. You might stop reading after you

finish with Chapter 7, but then you'll miss all of Gallagher's suggestions, activities, and strategies for weaving the teaching of writing skills into the writing. This is a book you'll want to keep on your bookshelf so that you can refer to it frequently.



Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement, by Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman (Heinemann, Portland, ME, 2012)

This outstanding book, which is a guide for districts and teachers to implement the Common Core Standards, includes a section on the writing standards in Chapters 6 through 9, with a chapter devoted to each of the writing types: narrative, argumentation, and informational writing. If you've wondered why argument occupies such an important place in the standards, you can find the answers on the first page of Chapter 9 (page 127). After a discussion of the importance of argument in the standards, the authors provide three important ideas to help you study the standards for argument writing, followed by suggestions to help you implement the argument writing standards. These important ideas are "The continuum of expectations for opinion and argument writing is steep; writing arguments eventually includes refuting counterarguments; and writing arguments eventually includes using sources, evaluating them, and using this analysis to engine convincing arguments."

The authors address how writing opinion and then argument grows in difficulty much more quickly than narrative and informational writing. Although the discussion includes grades 1–5 as well as 6–12, you'll find it helpful in understanding where your students should be when they reach the grade level you teach and what is really meant by the standard. Comparing the standard with the writing exemplars in the Common Core Appendix C offers insight into the actual expectation as seen in the evidence as opposed to the stated expectation in the standard.

The authors then share the complexity for secondary students in their logic and thinking, and they reveal the learning progression for this standard in grades 6 through 12. In addition, they show how the other writing standards can be woven into the argument standards and then provide suggestions to help you implement writing argument.

Carol Brown Dodson is ELA specialist and outreach specialist for the Ohio Resource Center. Dodson was an English language arts consultant for the Ohio Department of Education and is past president of OCTELA (Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts). Dodson, formerly a high school English teacher, department chair, and supervisor of English language arts in Columbus Public Schools, serves on the Ohio Graduation Test Reading Content Committee.

From the ORC Collection

More Resources for "Digital Writing"

Here are some excellent resources from the ORC collection on writing argument. If you find a favorite or two (or three or four or . . .), be sure to save them in your "My ORC Collection" for easy access.

ORC #5020
Argument, Persuasion, or Propaganda? Analyzing World War II Posters
http://www.ohiorc.org/record/5020.aspx
In this lesson plan, students analyze World War II posters chosen from online collections to explore how argument, persuasion, and propaganda differ. The lesson begins with a full-class exploration of the famous "I WANT YOU FOR U.S. ARMY" poster, featuring a determined Uncle Sam. Following the class discussion, students complete individual analysis projects. As a more formal assessment, students may use the information from their analysis to write an analytical essay. Links to online collections include posters from the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, and the Soviet Union. Background information and guiding questions are provided for instructors.

ORC #4798
Building Vietnam War Scavenger Hunts through Web-Based Inquiry
http://www.ohiorc.org/record/4798.aspx
In this lesson, students work in small groups to research aspects of the Vietnam War. Students adopt the perspective of members of a group involved in the war (e.g., soldier, nurse, doctor, photojournalist, TV reporter) and conduct Internet research to explore how that particular group was affected. After completing their research, students compose a scavenger hunt, constructing a series of questions leading to the answer of an overarching question: "What was the effect of the Vietnam War on the particular group?" Student groups then share their scavenger hunts with one another and reflect on how their research relates to the books they have read. Teachers may use a list of suggested topics for research or generate alternative ones. Students will need extended time and access to the Internet to meet the objectives of this lesson.

ORC #16007
Persuasive Writing: So You Think You Can Argue?
http://www.ohiorc.org/record/16007.aspx
Don't let the title stop you from using this unit plan for teaching argumentative writing. This set of eight lessons includes handouts, interactives, and full instructions for teachers and students to learn argument step-by-step. Each lesson provides an essential element of argument, culminating in writing the paper and then playing the "Supreme Decision" game. For students in grades 11 and 12, the links that are provided for arguing a real Supreme Court case take students into a simulation of a Supreme Court argument.

ORC #16008
Analyzing Famous Speeches as Arguments
http://www.ohiorc.org/record/16008.aspx
After gaining skill through analyzing a historical and contemporary speech as a class, students will select a famous speech from a list compiled from several resources and write an essay that identifies and explains the rhetorical strategies that the author deliberately chose while crafting the text to make an effective argument. Their analysis will consider questions such as what makes the speech an argument, how did the author's rhetoric evoke a response from the audience, and why are the words still venerated today? After completing the analyses of speeches, students will write an argumentative essay.

ORC #16009
Finding Common Ground: Using Logical, Audience-Specific Arguments
http://www.ohiorc.org/record/16009.aspx
This mini-lesson can be used before starting the unit on argumentation. Using a hypothetical situation, students generate arguments from opposing points of view, discover areas of commonality using Venn diagrams, and construct logical, audience-specific arguments to persuade their opponents.

ORC #6240
No Place Like Home? Arguing for the Protection of Endangered Species
http://www.ohiorc.org/record/6240.aspx
In this lesson, students investigate the impact of the physical environment on an endangered species. Working in pairs, they research an endangered species, factors that contribute to its endangerment, and ways to protect it. They then create a plan for the ideal care of the species and develop an advertisement to promote awareness about the need for its protection. The resource also provides a list of endangered species and a *New York Times* article about a debate between Cameroon and South Africa over ownership of four Western Lowland gorillas. Striking a connection between the article and other endangered animals will assist students in their research. Questions are also included to guide the research.

ORC #5113
Vote for Me! Developing, Writing, and Evaluating Persuasive Speeches
http://www.ohiorc.org/record/5113.aspx
This introductory lesson teaches students the characteristics of effective persuasive speech writing and oral argument. Students complete an online tutorial and analyze examples of speeches to learn what makes a strong speech. A second online tool helps them learn how to formulate a persuasive argument. Students then apply this information in two ways: by writing their own speeches and by evaluating speeches written by others. Although students are writing speeches to be delivered orally, they practice skills needed for all effective persuasive writing.

ORC #9767
Copyright Infringement or Not? The Debate over Downloading Music
http://www.ohiorc.org/record/9767.aspx
Whether making tapes and custom CDs or MP3 files for friends or downloading music through one of the many music-sharing systems available on the Internet, most students are aware of the ways that music can be distributed—and some have probably participated in sharing music themselves. This lesson takes advantage of students' interest in music and audio sharing as part of a persuasive debate unit. Students investigate the controversial topic of downloading music from the Internet. Students draw upon their prior knowledge and experience by discussing their own sources of music and Internet practices, then conduct Internet research to investigate the history and legal issues of copyright infringement related to sharing audio files. Students use graphic organizers and interactive web tools to synthesize information as well as to evaluate content and point of view. After students map their information, they work together in three- to four-person teams to take a stand on the controversy and develop persuasive arguments on their position. Following the rules of debate provided in the lesson, teams participate in a class debate on the subject of downloading.

Adolescent Literacy
In Perspective

Each issue of *Adolescent Literacy In Perspective* highlights a topic in adolescent literacy. Here you can read teacher-written articles, see what experts in the field are saying, gain insight from students, and find resources for classroom use.

What Is AdLIT?

Advancing Adolescent Literacy Instruction Together (AdLIT) is designed to address the unique literacy needs of adolescent learners by promoting and supporting effective, evidence-based practices for classroom instruction and professional development activities in Ohio's middle and secondary schools.

About the Ohio Resource Center

ORC works to improve teaching and learning among Ohio teachers by promoting standards-based, best practices in mathematics, science, reading, and social studies for Ohio schools and universities. The Center's resources are available primarily via the web and are coordinated with other state and regional efforts to improve student achievement and teacher effectiveness in K-12 mathematics, science, reading, and social studies. To learn more about ORC, visit www.ohiorc.org or http://ilearnohio.org.

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