

Common Core Writing Standards  
Three Types of Writing, Different Writing for Audience and Purpose,  
Idea Development with the Writing Process, Research, Final Format

## **Part II The Writing Standards**

### **Higher Standards with the Common Core**

Why write? Research shows that when students write often with timely feedback, achievement improves, in all content areas. Writing develops understanding. When we have to understand something, writing about it helps explore and define the topic. We write to better communicate our thoughts and ideas to others. Young people love to write to express themselves in writing that may be private, or more public.

### **Range of Purpose and Audience, Production and Distribution of Writing**

With Common Core standards, students are now asked to do a range of writing, a major shift from earlier state tests. Recognizing that earlier state assessments constrained the type of writing we prepared students for, now a broader range of writing and higher expectations within each format is required. This serves our students well. They no longer are taught for constricted type of writing. In addition, with Common Core Standards a teacher is not alone. The same writing standards are to be learned across disciplines and over the grade levels. From my own teaching experience, I saw what one can accomplish when students have common high expectations and teachers work in conjunction with others. With more writing required

by our cross-discipline team, writing came more easily to our students, and quality of writing improved. Students learn what we teach them.

## **I. Text Types and Purposes**

Standards One through Three delineate grade level expectations for the three different types of writing: persuasive (argument), expository (essay), and narrative.

Here are the Anchor Standards for the three types of writing:

1. Write **arguments** to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
2. Write **informative/explanatory** texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
3. Write **narratives** to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Each of these three types of writing have grade level appropriate versions, so that by seventh grade, for example, a student has mastered the five facets of the argumentative writing piece. Most if any students would not be able to proficiently write the high school level of these types of high level writing expected without the earlier grade level supports.

Standard One, Argument, called also opinion or persuasive writing at the earlier grade levels. Conforms with the common Common Core theme of presenting a case for a point. We see this in Reading Standard 8, "Delineate and Evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence." By learning to identify and assess writing in text, and by learning to build an effective argument in writing, students gain confidence in one's own thinking. Students won't be easily swayed by unsubstantiated rumor, will learn to analyze and think for oneself, recognize weak arguments in others, and most

importantly differentiate opinion from fact. We're now teaching students to move out into the world questioning, and as critical thinkers. Young people then understand that newspaper reading and television news may not be fact, but opinion, slanted to a viewpoint. They will look at who says what, consider the source. Young people will learn to be able to make a case for their own views, not easily swayed by others. The proliferation of text on the Internet can be seen with a critical eye. The intelligent and informed, knowledgeable creators of the Common Core put this standard as number one recognizing the importance of students understanding and creating making a case for a point, countering shallow thinking, rumor, myth, belief build on sand.

**Standard Two, Explanatory Writing**, is best seen in scientific reading and writing, when text has undergone levels of review by scientists who research and study data, findings, results. The scientific method seeks truth. A hypothesis is proven or disproven by objective data findings. Technology engineers avidly read and study more in their field to maintain currency as technology understanding rapidly advances. Their readings are most often tutorial in nature conveying here's the way it works, here's the information you need to do your work, solve your problem, build a new tool. This is not argument or opinion. It can't be. Scientists understand they need new information constantly. With new findings, these are rigorously questioned by scientists globally before accepted. Tests are replicated to check findings. A scientist reports information, data and findings, not opinion. Reading and writing in science classes is a different type of reading and writing. The reading is informational reading and the writing is non-fiction explanatory writing.

The type of essay writing promoted by Standard Two asks students to think differently about purpose. The intent is to explain. Informative writing to explain complex ideas can be a plot summary. An essay would be how to build a table, how to solve a math problem. A student can research the Civil Rights period and write an essay on the events. But with vast Internet information today, writing on a historical period can become subject to opinion as one reads from different sources. Over one hundred

books have been published on who is responsible, based on information collected, for the shooting of President Kennedy. These are good examples of presenting an argument, but competing arguments can't be considered informational writing, though each author would state his or her book is informational.

Distinguishing information from opinion is a highly valuable understanding for students to have. Distinguishing fact from opinion has been a skill often taught, but more hit or miss than consistent and rigorous. Common Core Standards require that students can write from an opinion point of view and can write in an explanatory way, so that in one's next step in life one can recognize fact from opinion and can present information in an explanatory manner and also in a persuasive manner, needed for success in real life, college, and the workplace. These are fine goals for us to help all students understand. When we see how much this broadens students' thinking, plus our skills as teachers, it's hard to argue with the value of these standards.

**Standard Three, Narrative writing**, brings to the fore what was lost in earlier standards. Narrative writing sparks creativity. Striking new, not stilted, descriptive language can be used in this more creative, inventive writing. We must be original and wrack our brains for a better, unique idea and word choice. We can create surprise, humor, innovation, twists of plot, capture an image, seek a special synonym, engage the reader through a different turn of phrase, organization, style, and tone. We're freed from the relative formality of argumentative and essay writing. Happily, when students learn to write a short story, the inventiveness can carry over into more interesting writing in the other forms. Older standards squelched creativity. The Common Core standards bring back imagination and innovative thinking. The dramatic difference between narrative writing and explanatory writing help develop student understanding of writing in different ways for different purposes.

Teacher inventiveness with narrative writing is also encouraged, refreshingly. In an extreme example, one day I glanced out of my classroom window to see a slew of police cars outside at the front of the school, lights flashing. It was one of those moments

when a teacher knows something is wrong but wants to calm her students and not create anxiety or draw attention. I knew I had to work to focus my students. Somehow I pulled out of my head the idea of creative writing on a color.

It was one of my most emphatic teaching moments. I chose a color and put the color “green” on the blackboard. I asked the students to quickly brainstorm associations with the color green, and wrote these on the board. I then chose another color and we brainstormed associations. The students loved this. I projected strongly, reinforced ideas positively, encouraged full participation. It was fun except deep down I was worried. I focused on the task. Then I asked each student to pick a color and write on it. Their writing was top-notch, fun, inventive, original. I enjoyed reading the papers and read them aloud to the class. I was interested in each student’s self-expression. This narrative area frees a teacher to be especially inventive. We find we can do this when we have to.

## **II. Production and Distribution of Writing**

While we’ve moved toward more formulaic writing under earlier state assessments, squelching idea development, the Common Core Writing Standards ask us to return to the writing process. The area of Production and Distribution of Writing promote writing process, not product. Three of the ten Writing standards explicitly promote the writing process.

4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

Standard Four describes the criteria for the final piece. Standard Four is the final product, stressing idea development and appropriate style. Standard Five directly, explicitly guides teachers to develop the writing process with students. Standard Five stresses writing, planning, then revising --re-seeing their work, as a real writer does. It's not the essay written on the school bus. Editing - making conventions corrections -- is a final step. Sometimes we have to throw out what we've written and begin again, having developed thoughts through an earlier draft, with writing drawing out our thinking. Standard Six requires that students discuss their work, and help one another.

The Common Core Standards look to guide development of ideas in writing, and collaborating to discuss work. Even the first three standards of Types of Writing - argument, expository writing and narrative -- will require drafting, idea development and final formulation into the facets of each writing type to be successful. Correcting spelling and punctuation comes last, in part because it distracts from the primary area of idea development.

All students can learn to do this. Generating ideas and developing one's thoughts through writing is always the first step.

**“Publishing” work to develop and polish writing, for others to see.**

Standard Six urges “publishing” work. Publishing may mean posting good work on the classroom walls, as we've long done. It may mean reading pieces - even parts of text -- aloud in class, for classmates to hear good writing. School literary magazines and student-written school newspapers - with good practice withstanding the pull of state assessment writing - celebrate and model varied types of student writing. Teachers still submit their student writing to writing competitions. Writing for publication pushes the best writing. Class collections of writing in a class publication are now easier with the Internet for web posting. Writing publication such as posting research papers on the classroom walls may not have the dramatic effect of playing publically in a

basketball game, with fans, family and cameras closely observing, but this publishing takes writing away from the private teacher viewing of a writing piece to a posting such as art classes have, so others can view the work. Such incentives for good writing are seen in research to enhance performance. Writing for peers enhances students' attention to their writing.

### **III. Research to Build and Present Knowledge:**

#### **Collecting Information, Assessing Sources, Analysis and Synthesis**

The third category of Writing standards, Seven through Nine, is that of research, essential in today's world of student embrace of the internet. These Standards ask us to ensure that students know how to assess sources, use multiple sources, write from student's own thinking, information gathered, and analysis rather than simply copying (plagiarism), and use evidence from print and digital resources for research, analysis and reflection.

#### Research to Build and Present Knowledge

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

In the area of research, it's become easier to simply cut and paste from the internet. Here we have an opportunity to reinforce ethical, respectful, honorable behavior. Would we want another to steal one's own ideas and words without attribution? Googling a suspicious phrase can unearth plagiarism, creating a teachable moment.

A focus of these Research writing standards is to have students learn how to take control of the multiple viewpoints found on the Internet to use the vast resources for learning and to ascertain credible information and resources. The emphasis is to use the computer wisely as a tool for learning. Students must question sources. Incorrect, biased, and uninformed content proliferates on the internet. Students must learn to sift through the garbage.

Research a captivating, intriguing area, finding information, and pulling together information and ideas into a coherent writing piece can be a challenging task. Common Core standard require that this is begun with small steps at earlier grades and move to repeat the process to become more familiar with it. Short research projects help students student practice the steps. Students may research a bird they select in the early grades, continue with short research at each grade, and by the end of middle school should be comfortable with the research process and writing the research paper, either as an essay or argumentative writing. Ideally, students should enter high school comfortable with the research process and ready to work on more complex research topics and steps, researching more broadly and discriminatingly.

A hook is students must care about their research topic. We now have the tools to bring a range of information to our students. We learn best when working from a need to know. Having students research an area they're interested in – or an angle of a research question that engages them -- propels their research. They want their final research paper writing to be well done when they care about the topic.

Standard Seven wisely proposes short research papers to learn the process. An example of what will be asked on the national assessments that's posted on the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) web site of Common Core test questions is that students will be provided with multiple pieces of information, and asked a question, to state an argument on, drawing from the sources evidence to support claims and argue against counter-claims. Knowing this in advance,

we prepare students for this assessment with research; starting with smaller short research work in the early grades builds the foundation. We can practice this process. We can also assess from student work and catch areas in which students need to work, such as simple the skill of paraphrasing. Idea development in research and writing research papers can be seen in the standards language language of “demonstrating understanding of the subject (Standard Seven), “draw evidence from . . . text to support analysis, reflection . . .”(Standard Nine).

#### **1V. Write Routinely and with a Range of Purposes**

The final writing standard, Standard Ten, is a simple yet essential one:

##### Range of Writing

10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

This Standard implies the use of free writing and journal writing to develop thinking and get ideas down.

In an especially effective class, I observed a teacher ask at the start of the class for the students to write in their journals the answer to a question on their homework reading. The class then proceeded on the topic of the question, with full class discussion. At the end of the class, the teacher again asked the students to write on the same question. The intent was to assess learning, and also to have the students express their thoughts on the topic. Had the class discussion changed their minds about the issue? Ideally it had. An extension of this would be to then have the students share their writing with a peer or two, for more in-depth learning, exchanging ideas. Reporting back to the full class is also helpful.

Importantly, the teacher needn't then collect student journals and read and grade the students. The purpose of this writing was to make writing a common daily activity, to have students learn from their own writing, and then to share with the class as a simple assessment of writing. It's not necessary for teachers to bury themselves in journals, papers, constant correcting, written feedback no one may ever read. This control is a disincentive to work on developing student writing, a reason to retire early. When we have 100 or more students at the secondary level, we can find ways to develop and assess writing that doesn't and shouldn't include the teacher reading every word. Common Core standards give us permission to avoid our constant paper correcting when they state "interact and collaborate with others" (Standard 6). The steps of the process of writing are delineated in Standard 5: "planning, revising, editing, re-writing, or trying a new approach." These steps can be aided by peers. Perhaps by staggering major writing assignments a teacher could be on top of each of these stages of writing with each student, but only if we had no more than ten students in a class, four classes instead of five, and never slept. It's not essential to read every word a student writes. It is essential that we find ways to develop student writing ability, through regular writing, rubrics to guide work, peer editing, classroom aids such as parents or senior citizens trained to help and trained in confidentiality. We can think outside the box on how to relieve us of the burden of assessing student writing while students work to hone their own writing for excellence.

### **Addressing frequent writing for varied purposes:**

#### **Short-changing Students and Exhausting Teachers with Paper "Correcting"**

The bane of the writing teacher's existence is "correcting" papers. Many teachers shrink from having students write, to avoid having to take papers home to "correct." I empathize with this stomach-churning, burdening task, with over 100 students. How I marveled at the physical education teachers who walked out of school empty handed, with no piles of student papers to "grade" at home. I wanted to be them.

Developing students' ability to review one another's writing, known as "peer editing," takes time to develop with students, but is well worth the time spent. We often avoid turning the work over to students because we fear they won't do well with assessing writing. But the benefits outweigh the correcting burden we retain from fear of lack of control. We must give up control for the goal of more and improved writing.

When students read a peer's writing, along with guidelines for what to look for – such as good ideas expressed, a good turn of phrase, sophisticated, striking vocabulary, continuity of focus, development of ideas, organization, does it make sense to the reader – students then learn to use these guides in their own writing. They internalize these guides by reviewing a peer's work. Through peer editing students develop metacognition -- thinking about thinking -- that they then apply to their own writing.

The teacher, by spending the time to develop students' ability to peer edit well, has a double win: the teacher, who already knows what good writing is, doesn't have the burden of looking for errors and weakness in students' writing. And the students develop in their own ability to write well by reviewing a peer's writing. Explaining better writing to a peer helps the student learn good writing.

I heard one teacher state, "I tried peer editing, but it didn't work, so I dropped it." This is where collaboration again can come in. When we confer with colleagues we can formulate our issues better and perhaps think of a way to resolve the problem. Hearing how a colleague solves the issue helps us. This is all too challenging to do on one's own.

Time spent on developing students as strong, effective peer editors is time well spent. This is hard for the teacher, to let go of control of marking up writing, the long tradition of "correcting" papers. When I recently asked one English department head to comment on something I had written, I expected feedback on the ideas. But he "corrected" my writing with marks on the conventions, perhaps one comment on

content. I was surprised. It's a long-ingrained habit. I see teachers sitting with their piles of papers, marking them up. Old habits die hard.

When students use idea development guidelines, they learn to focus on content development. At whatever level of peer review students do, it improves their own writing while catching weaknesses before the teacher sees the papers. And teachers who may feel too overburdened with writing don't always have to see the final writing piece if writing development is happening. One strong sixth grade teacher told me, "Other teachers ask me why I'm not always taking home piles of papers to grade. I have three small children at home. I have my students peer edit." This peer editing builds up students' understanding of good writing, which is communicated to the writer as a student being a good reader of others' writing, and also transfers to the student's own writing. This is a triple win. The teacher doesn't read the early draft(s). The student writer benefits from peer feedback. The peer editor internalizes the guides to good writing, and uses these in his or her own writing.

In doing "learning walks" with a district curriculum director, at the high school level a teacher lectured the full period on a writing assignment at a small group that appeared to be a lower level class. When we then visited the middle school, we walked into a classroom where students were sitting all around the room focused on their work. We couldn't find the teacher. We asked a student what he was doing. He said he was reading other students' writing on a book they had read. We asked what he was looking for. He said he was looking to see if there was anything that didn't make sense to him in the writing piece, if he found any misspelled words or punctuation errors, and if the piece had a main point he understood. Some students were working on the class set of laptops, others were reading for information, others writing by hand, others peer editing. All were focused on the work. We finally found the teacher in a corner trying to help a student retrieve a lost file, a learning time to save files frequently, another skill needed for writing.

## **Correcting Mechanics, or “Conventions”**

When we focus on “correcting” papers by put all those semi-colons, apostrophes, and periods in; note spelling errors on the paper for the student, little is learned. It’s hard for the teacher to resist these corrections, but we can better use our time by first focusing on content, on idea development. Research tells us red ink is a disincentive for writing development. Editing – correcting spelling and punctuation-- is the final step.

## **Teacher Conferencing**

In addition to peer editing on student writing, writing is also well developed with individual conferencing. A teacher meeting with a student to confer on writing is powerful. The teacher talks with the student about areas of strength and improvement. The teacher may draw a student out on an idea, “Tell me more about this.” Teacher conferencing is an excellent way to support student writing. Even a five minute, or two minute conference, is better than none. I once had a student teacher who gave the class an assignment and one-by-one invited each student up to his desk. He conferred with each student for 3 – 5 minutes. Each student smiled at the end of the conference. This was all done in just one 52 minute class period. He enjoyed this because he was able to personalize writing instruction for his students. He could assess their needs and deliver then pungently and diplomatically. Those students had never had such attention.

If the conferencing is too overwhelming in time for teachers, schools can train parent and community members, local college students, and senior citizens to ask the main questions on writing, again relieving the teacher burden. The training also includes confidentiality. These teacher assistants can use comments and questions such as, “Tell me what it is you want to say here,” “How does this point connect with that point,” “This is a wonderful idea you have here. Can you explain this to me more?” “Your

ending is very strong. How can you make your beginning a strong statement?" Such voluntary assistants can be the teacher's new best friends when developing each student's writing.

### **Types of Writing for Purpose and Audience**

Once this understanding of how to develop good writing is established, so that teachers and students genuinely care about the process of developing good writing, the other Common Core writing standards will seem easier.

The first three writing standards spell out the criteria for the three different forms of writing, to learn to write differently for different purposes. Today this is especially needed for a world in which unique, inventive texting and tweeting spelling and messaging shorthand have become a common means of expression. One hundred forty characters doesn't encourage idea development and complex expression. It values short.

The development of the varied forms of persuasive (argument) writing, expository (essay) writing, and narrative writing are best developed in the writing process of drafting, planning, peer editing, re-writing, conferencing and revision, with final editing. A well shaped argument which includes response to counter-claims doesn't spring fully formed from the mind of even the most experienced writer.

The five grade level facets of each of these three types of writing build from year to year in stated grade level mastery expectations. Ideally, when the Common Core Standards all kick in, the teacher has students coming in to class who have learned an earlier stage of the writing; this is built on at each grade level; the teacher doesn't have to start from scratch. This is one of the great advantages of Common Core Standards, the building from year to year. It's also a strong reason for each teacher to adopt the standards, to be good to one's colleagues who follow us, and to benefit from the earlier teacher's work.

One of the few findings of the “90/90/90” study of researcher Doug Reeves showed that in a large scale look at schools with populations of 90% minority, 90% low income, and 90% Proficient is that frequent writing with timely feedback results in student improvements in all content areas. It makes sense. Writing stimulates ideas, forces us to think and process information, and communicate our ideas to others.

Common themes in the Writing standards are varied types of writing, frequent writing, the stages and skills of research, collection and analysis of information, with the end result of clear and coherent writing with development, organization and style appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

When we take the time to reflect on the Common Core Writing standards, we find the best goals for good writing development. These can be integrated into our different courses and different material and concept learning. The focus is no longer on product format and correctness but idea development and expression that pushes students’ thinking, helping to prepare our students for their futures, arming them with powerful skills and understandings.

Means of attaining this goal is use of alternative means of assessing student writing, and developing task-appropriate and student-appropriate rubrics in kid-friendly language for students to see what the teacher is looking for – to clarify expectations. Writing fluency, as with reading fluency, comes with extensive practice, under the guidance of a devoted, caring teacher who uses good tools to develop with each student the important ability to write well.

Reference Reeves, Douglas B. *High Performance in High Poverty Schools: 90/90/90 and Beyond: Accountability in Action*, Read and Learn publisher, 2000