Best Practice with the “Text-Based Essay” MCAS Question

Comparing old “Legacy” MCAS and Current MCAS

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The current MCAS has a new question type called a “Text-Based Essay.” This is now the writing expected on MCAS.

In 2018 and 2019 MCAS, Opinion/ Argument writing is only tested at tenth grade, where it includes writing to an audience, such as letter to the editor or writing to your congressman. Narrative writing is not tested at tenth grade to date, and we may expect this again this year, but it doesn’t hurt to familiarize students with Narrative writing.

Opinion/Argument writing isn’t tested to date below tenth grade, but Narrative and Essay are. Some bit of familiarity with Opinion is ok to have.

Basically, this “Text-Based Essay” writing piece is a reading/ literary analysis piece of writing. It begins in third grade with the short answer just 1200 characters or equivalent of one hand-written paragraph writing expectation, then 2500 characters at gr 3 – 5, and then moves to as much as a 5,000 character writing piece at the later grades.

Now the Argument writing piece, the Essay writing type, and the Narrative writing type of the Standards are referred to as Text-based Essays in the current MCAS. The *grade level facets* of the particular writing type: Opinion/ Argument, Essay, and Narrative are the criteria used to assess the student’s writing: These facets are Introduction, text evidence, transitional word, “precise” words (not vague or general), conclusion.

One way to look at the Text-based Essay is that it’s an extended Open Response question type of writing. Our “old,” “legacy” MCAS asked students to write on one of the Standards in relation to a reading passage, such as on what are the Central Idea and Supporting Details of a passage. The Open Response question answer was short, just a paragraph, so many teachers just taught students to begin with the answer to the question, often asking students to turn the test question into the first sentence of the Open Response question answer. Then students were told to give just two or maybe three examples from the text, then provide reasoning, or simple conclusion.

This simple process is similar to the current Essay MCAS writing, except that *the writing must be closely connected with the question Reading Passage*. Therefore, first, in preparation to respond to the Text-Based Essay, the student must be able to answer the reading question asked. On the common Text-Based Essay question of “What is the central idea and supporting details,” the student must be able to analyze the reading passage to determine the central idea. This is basic needed reading and literary analysis understanding.

In responding to the Text-Based Essay question, we teach the process in class multiple times before the MCAS test, to develop automaticity with the format.

The first step is to have the students read the passage carefully to get a sense of the passage, and then read the Text-based Essay question. Then the student re-reads the passage, looking for the central idea and supporting detail as one reads, now reading just to determine central idea. The student uses the “scratch paper” provided with the test to write down legibly the central idea one finds. Then the student goes back into the passage and locates supporting evidence, jotting these down. Then the student is ready to write.

**Recommended: Using the Writing Process for Text-Based Writing**

However, a big change is that for the good writer, we teachers understand that writing is thinking. Writing stimulates thinking. As we write, new thoughts come to us. These are better thoughts than we had while just brainstorming ideas in advance of writing. Experienced writers often say that they don’t know what a character they’re writing will do next, what turn the character will take. This isn’t mystical, it’s just that new ideas come from our heads when we write.

Therefore, the student both in preparation for the MCAS test, and during the test, won’t simply copy what he or she has jotted down in notes. Big change here. In fact, as the student has looked back in the passage for the central idea and for supporting evidence, he or she may modify one’s original thinking about what the central idea is, or change the thought for a new thought, as one reads more carefully. Jotting down these ideas may well change.

*For our most struggling students, it’s acceptable to have students simply jot down central idea and supporting evidence, then copy into a simple writing piece. However, many struggling students ARE capable of using the writing process, and we should try to help all students with this in practice work.*

So as the student begins to write, that first reading, then the look at the question, the jotting down of notes, are all just first steps. These steps move away as only the first steps when the writer then begins to write. The writer at the higher level of writing ability won’t even look back at those jottings, because as one becomes more involved in the writing piece itself, new ideas come to mind. Looking back into the passage to verify one’s thoughts is fine to do, but one focuses mainly on getting ideas out and on the paper. Also, the writer at this time doesn’t stop to worry about spelling or getting the one best word right, transitional words or phrases, or sentencing or punctuation. Just beginning the writing comes now. Getting the ideas out is the first step in writing. One at this point can’t write the perfect final piece of introduction, evidence, conclusion, because one doesn’t yet know for what the best introduction, evidence, conclusion are. Often the last step in writing is writing a good introduction. The conclusion emanates from what one has written. Few if any writers – including long-time published authors – write the final piece as the first piece. If one does, it’s not the best work, it’s simply fulfilling the bottom basic of an assigned task.

 

This writing process approach now becomes automatic for the student, because the student has practiced this in class, to begin the Text-Based Essay by stating what he or she sees as the answer to the test question, which may be the central idea. Then the student provides evidence of this. But as the student writes, he or she may well recall text information that he or she didn’t jot down in notes, to prove one’s point. This is why we don’t use only the notes, the jotting, as the evidence, because the brain goes deeper when writing. The first writing of what the central idea is may well change. In fact, during the practice sessions, a student can see in the original jottings how far one has come away from those initial jottings in the actual better ideas of the writing. The student may see how far one’s thoughts on the central idea have come in being modified from the initial jotting, or even changed, in the actual step of writing.

From thinking of this process — which is the writing process that helps students become engaged in writing and to become good writers – we see how constraining the formulaic writing is. With formulaic writing there’s no room for ideas to expand and develop, little or no thinking is going on. This is limiting for all students. It may well help more struggling students with MCAS. But it’s good to long-term over the school year help develop the writing process, for best idea development, as well as better, more interesting five facets for fluent, thoughtful writing. Short-term MCAS preparation is jot down text evidence, write the essay. Third grade teachers now often have children write out their essay and then type up the essay on the computer, since writing on the computer is a limited skill at third grade. Since it’s an untimed test, this works. Many teachers are now bringing in no-cost keyboarding programs for third grade keyboarding skills.

After writing the draft of the Text-based Essay, the writer goes back to re-read what is written. In practice on this writing, the student will have learned either from peer editing with a peer looking at one’s work, or self-editing from reading the piece aloud to oneself, or from teacher individual face to face comments (the ideal), the writer learns good sentencing, correct punctuation, correct spelling (no spell-check is provided on the computer test!), and introduction, transitions, and conclusion. So these may be added in. Also, now with all students doing the computer test, all students must learn to first draft and then revise and edit on the computer.

Through the class practice work, the student learns too how to expand on ideas. However, the Text-based Essay writing is assessed on quality of ideas appropriate to the reading passage, and quality of writing more than length, so writing that’s accurate to the text and well written if less than the 5,000 character will get a better score than one that’s padded with extraneous information or unrelate ideas to reach the 5,000 characters.

The best thing about using this writing process to develop the Text-based Essay writing, is that this process is on writing the three Writing Types of Argument, Essay and Narrative. For these types, the specific facets of Introduction, Claims and Evidence, Transitions, and Conclusion are required, and these writings are related to a reading passage. Correctness with “conventions” of spelling, punctuation and sentencing is now counted more currently in the twelve score points total, so what teachers have always done in paying attention to writing correctness is honored.

For Narrative, the student first practices in class with other students to brainstorm possible next steps for a story to take, to extend the story in their writing, following the prompt calling for “sequence of events,” character and setting, and then uses the Narrative writing facets of descriptive detail, dialogue (the words that are spoken), character and plot, all seen in the classroom with fiction reading, and practiced along with fiction reading when working over the school year.

**Rewording the prompt as Introduction**

*Last thing:* Principals who look at released MCAS student work are noting that some good writing is marked down by scorers. This happens when the Introductory statement – the first sentence – is not directly tied to the writing prompt question.

When students turn the writing prompt question into the first sentence, this adds score points to the MCAS writing. Is this best practice? Not necessarily. But this signals to the scorer that the writer is paying attention to the question asked. MCAS is doing this because they’ve found that often students were trained to just write, and they write a pre-planned answer for a question. Therefore, scores became more strict in scoring writing pieces as off-topic. Principals are asked to review test scores before public reporting, but often don’t, to catch a “good” student’s poor score and to challenge the scoring. So, for MCAS writing, it’s safest to have students reword the prompt for MCAS. In best practice writing, we want to see a good “hook” that attracts the reader. This illustrates writing Standard 10 of students learning different writing types for different purposes and different audiences, a good skill to have.