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Utilizing the Writing Process to Develop Meaningful Arguments

Arguments are used for many purposes—to change the reader’s point of view, to bring about some action on the reader’s part, or to ask the reader to accept the writer’s explanation or evaluation of a concept, issue, or problem. An argument is a reasoned, logical way of demonstrating that the writer’s position, belief, or conclusion is valid.

—NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 2

With the advent of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (2010), argument writing has assumed a dominant role in writing instruction. Even though most students learn to argue from a young age, as they advance in the middle school grades, they must acquire more structured and sophisticated writing skills that support logical, evidence-based arguments.

Many teachers feel overwhelmed with the demands of CCSS implementation and may feel concern regarding how to teach argument writing to make it accessible to students with varying academic abilities and learning styles. Based on our experiences teaching writing instruction on the secondary and college levels and providing staff development to teachers for more than thirty-five years combined, we argue that though the task of teaching argument writing is challenging, with varied approaches, teachers and students can succeed. In this article, we provide teachers with instructional strategies for argument writing that align with the model of process writing.

The Challenges of Teaching Argument Writing

The challenges of teaching argument writing are many. For one, the terminology can be confusing. The terms *thesis*, *grounds*, *major claim*, *minor claim*, *warrant*, *argument*, *counterargument*, *logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*, *stance*, and so on all appear in the

context of teaching argument writing. Second, during middle school years, bridging *opinion* writing called for by the CCSS in earlier grades and *argument*, which is called for in the advanced grades, requires scaffolding and building on prior knowledge. The major difference between opinion and argument is that a strong argument includes a *counterargument*, which requires writers to anticipate different perspectives than their own. Less advanced or less mature writers may not be able to see beyond their own beliefs. Third, investigating and providing sound evidence to defend claims requires various skills—research, analytical, and critical thinking. Fourth, sophisticated argument writing necessitates knowledge of what rhetorical devices are and how they function in a text to achieve a particular effect and evoke responses from an audience.

Process Writing

Process writing, a useful approach to teach argument writing, is based on the idea that the steps of planning, drafting, revising/editing, and publishing produce good writing. The goal is to engage in writing multiple drafts and revising each one to produce a final product that is appropriate to the topic, purpose, and audience. Planning or *prewriting* activities, such as brainstorming, allow students to express their ideas and design a plan that will help them begin *drafting*. Through peer and teacher conferencing, students *revise* and

edit to improve the meaning and form of their writing. Students may *publish* their writing in the school newspaper or share their work with other teachers, peers, or administrators.

Instructional Strategies

Prewriting

During prewriting, students play with their ideas regarding their topics. In this stage, if students are not worried about their phrasing or their punctuation, they can put all of their energy into thinking about their stance in the argument and the value of their evidence. But before any writing begins, argument terms need to be introduced and reviewed. Appendix A lists some common argument terms and their definitions. The following three methods of instruction for prewriting support an approach that balances the low-pressure start to writing with the consciousness of important elements of argument:

Improvisation

This activity helps students recognize the importance of evidence and of counterargument. Two students or two pairs of students stand in front of the room and improvise an argument over a topic that is silly, and, therefore, safe to argue in front of others: lemonade vs. iced tea or cats vs. dogs, for example. While they are arguing, the seated students take notes on strong evidence and strong responses to counter opponents' evidence. The improvised arguments should only take three to five minutes. The reflection that follows,

in which students use their notes to discuss the strengths of each argument, may take longer.

Dinner party discussion

This activity involves all students. Set up your desks as a large table. When students enter the room, inform them that they are going to be part of a dinner party discussion. In this discussion, students must listen to one another and build on what they hear. Of course, this is what we hope our classrooms look like all the time; however, if you need a reboot (as some of us do at times), this activity may help. You can tell students that you will be keeping track of how many times people speak, and remind your usual participants that it is rude to dominate the conversation at a dinner party, so it is important to make sure that all students share. Sometimes, being a good guest means helping to support someone else's voice.

Debate

This more formalized approach to prewriting involves students completing an organizer that calls for the following:

- Claim
- Evidence—Three reasons/facts that support your claim
- How your opponent may refute your claim
- How you will counter your opponent's refutation

All students complete this organizer. However, we know that not all students will want to de-

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

"Developing Evidence-Based Arguments from Texts" provides teachers with strategies for helping students understand the differences between persuasive writing and evidence-based argumentation. Students become familiar with the basic components of an argument and then develop their understanding by analyzing evidence-based arguments about texts. Students then generate evidence-based arguments of texts using a variety of resources. Links to related resources and additional classroom strategies are also provided.

<http://bit.ly/1KfCEiK>

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bate, and we know that large teams for debate often lose their focus. Therefore, we recommend limiting debate teams to four or five people. The remaining students are debate listeners. This role is not passive. Rather, the listeners complete a response page that includes the following prompts:

- Tell one idea that contradicts with your belief regarding this topic. How does that idea provide a powerful counterargument?
- Tell two ideas that your classmates shared that relate to ideas you listed on your debate organizer.
- What was the best argument that you heard today? Explain.

Drafting

In the drafting stage, students begin to formulate their stances and provide supporting evidence. They compose drafts in which ideas are grouped in a logical order to support their purpose. As students advance in grade level, they need guidance in moving from writing opinion pieces to composing arguments and counterarguments. You can scaffold the development of argument writing by providing frames on the sentence, paragraph, and essay levels with important information missing. The following structured, scaffolded strategy can aid in the process.

Scaffolded argument writing frames

Writing frames provide an organizational structure for students' argument writing. On the sentence level, students may be asked to complete the following structure:

- What is your opinion of _____?
My opinion is
- Why do you think/believe this?
I think/believe ____ because _____.

The following paragraph structure scaffolds students' writing and helps them compose a more elaborate response:

- I agree/disagree (circle) with _____.
- State 1 reason: _____.

- State 3 details:
 - Detail 1: _____
 - Detail 2: _____
 - Detail 3: _____

Writing frames can facilitate teachers' efforts to bridge argument concepts as students ascend in grades. For example, Writing Standard 1 for grade 5 (NGA & CCSO, 2010) requires students to write opinion pieces on topics or texts in which they

introduce a topic or text clearly, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure in which ideas are logically grouped to support the writer's purpose . . . provide logically ordered reasons that are supported by facts and details, link opinion and reasons using words, phrases, and clauses, and provide a concluding statement or section related to the opinion presented. (W.5.1)

The Opinion Essay Frame (Appendix B) incorporates the expectations previously listed. In addition, a list of connecting words would be helpful to provide students with ways to link opinion and evidence. These words need to be analyzed and discussed so that students understand their meanings and how to use them appropriately to achieve their intended purpose. Connecting words and phrases that exemplify this concept might include *for example*, *to illustrate this*, or *for instance*. Phrases for counterarguments might include *contrary to*, *however*, or *conversely*. Phrases to show cause and effect might include *thus*, *as a result*, or *consequently*.

When moving up to grade 8, students need to engage in higher-order thinking and develop evidence-based arguments, recognize opposing perspectives, and identify and use credible sources (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Specifically, they are required to write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence and specifically

introduce claim(s), acknowledge and distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically . . . using accurate, credible sources and words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence. (W.8.1)

Argument Essay Frame 1 (Appendix C) is one example of an organizer for students to construct an argument essay. For students who need more support, you may want to provide them with a scaffolded version with outlined expectations, definitions of key terms, sentence frames, and examples (Appendix D). Scaffolded argument writing frames benefit all learners, including culturally and linguistically diverse students who may have the knowledge of *what* they want to say but need the linguistic support to communicate it in writing. As students begin to hone their writing skills, you should remove the scaffolded structures and allow students to develop their own style.

Modeling

Modeling is an effective instructional strategy that allows the students to observe the teacher's argument writing process. As students see you struggle to construct arguments and provide sound reasons in a logical structure, they may recognize that writing requires hard work and particular skills that they must develop. You may demonstrate argument writing through think-alouds or sharing of plans and multiple drafts that exemplify the recursive nature of the writing process. Also, more proficient students can model argument writing for other students who need more assistance.

Mentor texts

Mentor texts are necessary to provide students with models of exemplar argument writing. Articles in periodicals, speeches, debates, and trials can serve as examples of good argument structure, content, and language. These texts could be presented in multimodal ways—orally or visually—to enhance learning and appeal to students' multiple intelligences. Students can also be the ones deciding what constitutes a mentor text by analyzing multiple texts in the same genre—speeches, for example; in this way, students further develop their argument and critical thinking skills.

Revising/Editing

In the revising and editing stages, students often struggle with finding areas that are ripe for development or change. When they read each other's work, they fall into the trap of simply telling each other "that was interesting" or commenting solely on grammatical errors. The following suggestions help support critical thinking about writing.

Checklists

Writing checklists can encourage students to think about the elements of their own argument or a peer's argument. Possible elements for inclusion on a checklist include:

- Grounds
- Claim
- Warrant
- Concede counterargument
- Refute counterargument
- Appeal to logic
- Appeal to authority
- Appeal to emotion
- Powerful anecdote
- Powerful statistic
- Powerful quote
- Use of linking words/phrases

Encourage your students to decide which of these elements are most important and create a class checklist.

Color-coding

Using a checklist like the one above, students can color-code their drafts. Assign a different highlighting color to three or four different elements. Students highlight the portions of their drafts that represent each element. This approach makes the balance of the components of the writing visually evident to the students.

Revision awards

We think that it is great that students are so supportive of each other when they revise their

peers' work. However, we want that support to be as meaningful as it can be. Thus, the creation of revision awards. Students nominate one another for awards based on the strength of their writing. You can suggest categories, but we recommend staying open to student-generated categories as well. Possible categories include:

- Best hook in the introduction
- Best appeal to logic
- Best appeal to authority
- Best appeal to emotion
- Best addressing of counterargument
- Most powerful anecdote
- Most powerful statistic
- Best "so what" statement in the conclusion

You can also create your own polls with these categories on polleverywhere.com and have students send their votes via mobile phone, Twitter, or web browser, which you can display in real time.

Publishing

After students have submitted their final drafts and you have reviewed and/or evaluated them, it is time to celebrate their argument writing by sharing it with an authentic audience.

Opportunities for an authentic audience

An authentic audience allows students to write for real-life purposes, which can be motivating and rewarding. Sharing can take place in the classroom where student work is posted on the bulletin board or wall and shared in a gallery walk. Other authentic audience formats can include mentorships, pen pals, and multimodal formats such as blogs, Wikispaces, and social networking sites. Students could also present their work using technology to staff, parents, or administrators at a school event, like parent-teacher conferences or open house.

Print and online publishing

Publishing opportunities for students' work are numerous. Students can publish in class or school

venues, like newsletters, magazines or school newspapers. Appendix E lists resources for young writers to submit and get published and resources that will support young writers.

Conclusion

We argue that each of the approaches described in this article are grounded in theory. Benjamin Bloom would approve of the higher-order thinking that students engage in as they develop their arguments. Howard Gardner would approve of the multiple intelligences called upon in the varied activities in each of the stages in the writing process. John Dewey would approve of the writing for authentic audiences. For more information on connections to these theorists, see chapter 1 in *Getting to the Core of English Language Arts, Grades 6-12* (Giouroukakis & Connolly, 2012).

What we believe is most important to note is the potential transfer of understanding that these activities afford. If teachers in various disciplines utilize these approaches, middle schoolers may see that developing an argument for their rationale for the results of a science lab is much like developing a literary analysis paper for language arts or a position statement for social studies. This transfer of understanding would meet with approval from Grant Wiggins.

Though some might state that argument writing is just too difficult a task for developing writers, we hope that the evidence we present here, in the form of user-friendly approaches (pathos and logos) and theory for support (ethos), will help you to take heart and approach teaching this important skill with newfound vigor.

If teachers in various disciplines utilize these approaches, middle schoolers may see that developing an argument for their rationale for the results of a science lab is much like developing a literary analysis paper for language arts or a position statement for social studies.

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Appendix A: Glossary of Argument Terms

Claim—This is what you believe and what you want your readers to believe.

- *What statement should be accepted?*

Example: People should use hybrid cars rather than conventional cars.

Grounds—Data or facts on which your claim is based.

- *What is the proof (the data or real facts)?*

Example: According to the EPA, motor vehicles collectively cause 75 percent of carbon monoxide pollution in the United States.

Warrant—Connects claim and grounds.

- *Why or how does the data support the claim?*

Example: Hybrid cars help produce less air pollution.

Connecting Grounds, Claim, Warrant in a Sentence:

Given that . . . , people should . . . because

[Grounds] [Claim] [Warrant]

Given that, according to the EPA, motor vehicles collectively cause 75 percent of carbon monoxide pollution in the United States, people should use hybrid cars rather than conventional cars because hybrid cars help produce less air pollution.

Counterargument—Addresses what a person may say to the contrary of your argument.

1. **Concede**—note the potential disagreement/argument against your stance.
2. **Refute**—minimize the argument against your stance by telling how it is ineffective or how key players might address the issue raised.

Example: Some may say that hybrid cars cannot solve the pollution crisis overnight; however, hybrid cars are a viable, long-term solution.

Ethos: Appeal to expert/authority.

Logos: Appeal to logic.

Pathos: Appeal to emotion.

Adapted from: Giouroukakis, V., & Connolly, M. (2012). *Getting to the core of English language arts, grades 6-12: How to meet the common core state standards with lessons from the classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Appendix B: Opinion Essay Frame (Grade 5)

I agree or disagree with _____. I believe that _____

_____. The reasons are (list the three reasons) _____

State reason #1: _____

Detail #1: Specifically, _____

Detail #2: Furthermore, _____

Detail #3: Consequently, _____

State reason #2: _____

Detail #1: Specifically, _____

Detail #2: Furthermore, _____

Detail #3: Consequently, _____

State reason #3: _____

Detail #1: Specifically, _____

Detail #2: Furthermore, _____

Detail #3: Consequently, _____

In conclusion (summarize, restate opinion), _____

Appendix C: Argument Essay Frame 1 (Grades 8 and Up)

Topic

Introduce Thesis (include grounds, major claim, and warrant)

Reason/Evidence

Reason/Evidence

Counterargument (Concede and Refute)

Some might argue . . .

However,

“Final Knockout Punch” for conclusion

Adapted from: Giouroukakis, V., & Connolly, M. (2012). *Getting to the core of English language arts, grades 6–12: How to meet the common core state standards with lessons from the classroom*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Appendix D: Argument Essay Frame 2 (Grades 8 and Up) (Scaffolded)

Topic: Lunch off campus

Thesis (include grounds, major claim, and warrant)

Given that _____, I believe _____ because _____.

Given that the school lunch menu is limited and the cafeteria is overcrowded, I believe that all students should be allowed to leave campus for lunch because leaving would give students access to varied meal options and to a relaxed setting.

Reason/Evidence

There are four restaurants within walking distance that offer healthy meals.

Reason/Evidence

Students are better able to concentrate if they have had a relaxing break.

Counterargument (Concede and Refute)

Some may be concerned about students opting not to return after lunch; however, if a student does not return, he or she will lose the privilege.

“Final Knockout Punch” for conclusion

The CCSS call for critical thinking. Students think critically about their restaurant choices. They think critically about their food options. When they return to class, they think critically about what they are learning.

Appendix E: Resources for Young Writers to Submit and Get Published

Middle School and High School

Figment (figment.com)—a community where teens can share their writing, connect with other readers, and discover new stories and authors.

Kid Pub (kidpub.com)—established in 1995, Kid Pub is one of the oldest websites that publishes kids' writing.

Teen Ink (teenink.com)—accepts art, poems, stories, personal narratives, college admission essays, and reviews of favorite (and least favorite) movies, books, colleges, and websites for their monthly print and online magazine.

Space (fablogs.org/space)—an online digital literary zine for middle schoolers, accepts all kinds of creative work—personal narratives, photos, poems, multimedia.

Primary and Elementary

Little Planet Times (littleplanettimes.com)—an online newspaper by kids and for kids grades K–5. Youngsters can enjoy other kids' creative stuff and submit letters, stories, jokes, movie and book reviews, or whatever else they would like.

CyberKids (cyberkids.com/he/html/submit.html)—provides a voice for young people on the Internet by publishing original creative work by kids ages 7 to 12.

Launch Pad (launchpadmag.com)—provides a creative and engaging atmosphere for young writers and artists to display their work. It also provides tips and ideas to help kids improve on their writing.

Special Focus

Teenvoices (teenvoices.com)—invites teenage or young-adult women to submit writing, art, websites, or a description of an activism project.

Kids on the Net (kidsonthenet.org.uk)—based in the United Kingdom, this site invites stories, poems, creative nonfiction, and reviews of books, websites, and events. Special emphasis is placed on providing support for creating hypertext narratives and other digital writing using new media.

Writing with Writers (teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/)—Scholastic's free online workshops are hosted by name authors on genres such as book reviews, speeches, news, biographies, descriptive writing, folk tales, myths, mysteries, and poetry. Young writers can follow the author's or editor's tips for writing and revision, listen to the audio files, and read published work by other students.

Midlink Magazine (ncsu.edu/midlink/)—a quarterly online publication that invites classroom projects submitted by teachers and their students.

Adapted from: National Writing Project. (2010, May 3). A collection of online publishing opportunities for student writing. Retrieved from <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/3138>

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