



Heather Clayton is the author of *Making the Standards Come Alive!* and is the principal of Mendon Center Elementary School in Pittsford Central School District, New York. She is also a co-author of *Creating a Culture for Learning* published by Just ASK.

Subscribe to
Making the Common Core Come Alive!
and access the library



Teaching Argument Writing: An Inquiry Process

The aim of an argument or discussion should not be victory, but progress.

- Joseph Joubert, French essayist

My father used to say, "Don't raise your voice; improve your argument."

- Desmond Tutu

The **Common Core** has placed importance on critical thinking, not only in the area of reading, but also in writing. According to George Hillocks Jr., "Argument is at the heart of critical thinking and academic discourse, the kind of writing students need to know for success in college." The purpose of argument writing is to use logic and evidence to convince an audience of the validity of claims.

Students, by nature, are argumentative. They argue points with their peers, parents, and siblings. They do not, however, always anchor their arguments with meaningful evidence or acknowledge opposing viewpoints. Our goal in teaching argument writing is to ensure that

students can argue logically and thoughtfully in real world situations. Students need explicit instruction and feedback in argument writing as they are not likely to learn to develop strong arguments by themselves.

Learning to write arguments well depends on the teacher's approach to instruction and how they prepare students to broaden their knowledge, develop ideas, and communicate effectively using relevant and authentic evidence. Argument writing is just as much about thinking critically and reasoning effectively as it is about the structure of the writing itself. It is a process of inquiry, with the goal of seeking truth, information, and knowledge.

Tenets of Teaching Argument Writing

Students need to gain familiarity with the structure of argument writing.

Prior to asking students to write arguments, they must first have a vision for the kind of writing they will be asked to do. Students should understand and have seen examples of essays that include a thesis statement or claim, followed by supporting evidence and a conclusion. Without understanding the fundamentals of essay writing, it will be a challenging task for students to write a well-developed argument.

To support that learning process, access a collection of annotated argument and

opinion writing samples, K-12, by the Vermont Writing Collaborative with Student Achievement Partners and CCSSO at http://achievethecore.org/content/upload/ArgumentOpinion_K-12WS.pdf

The document includes both on-demand writing, as well as a variety of discipline-specific tasks written for different audiences and purposes. Each writing sample is annotated using the language from the **Common Core**. Another source of annotated writing samples that illustrates the criteria outlined in the standards for argument, informative/explanatory, and



“We all have an enormous responsibility to bring to the attention of others information they do not have, which has the potential of causing them to rethink long-held ideas.”

Howard Zinn,
American historian

narrative writing at different grade levels is the **Common Core Appendix C** available at www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_C.pdf. Each writing sample meets the writing standards for the identified grade level.

Students should begin by looking at the data before asserting their claim.

Contrary to the beliefs of many, according to Hillocks, the teaching of argument should not begin with the writing of a claim, or thesis statement. In fact, the best arguments are developed when students begin by examining the data, or information, that will later become the basis for their argument. After all, students will present the most compelling arguments when their claims grow from a deep understanding of the topic they have chosen.

Students will arrive at their claim once they have collected data and critically thought about their topic. Students gather and examine information in a variety of ways. For instance, students can strengthen their knowledge of their chosen topic by examining a single text or a set of texts depending on the nature of the assignment. The texts that students are using should be thought-provoking, represent multiple perspectives, and inspire questions that allow for many different interpretations. Students may also use videos, online resources, photographs, artifacts, and visuals to further develop their ideas. For our English language learners, the use of close captioned videos and digital-supported text can help them to gain content knowledge.

When reading to grow ideas, students should read texts multiple times for different purposes. By doing so, students will begin to notice patterns and connections that lead to the formation of questions. As students pose, interpret, and answer their questions, they are actually generating their claim.

Notes can be recorded in any format, depending on the structure of the text, nuances of the topic, and style of the learner. No matter the format, students should include not only the essential information about the topic, they should include their own questions and responses to the information they have gathered. The use of sticky notes and two-column charts are beneficial when documenting reactions to sections of text.

The notes gathered for argument writing are used for a distinct purpose; as key evidence that will rationally shape the thinking of the reader and convince them of the authenticity and relevance of the argument. Therefore, as students gather information and author their notes, they should consider the importance of those notes for later writing.

For example, after reading that krill, a whales' main source of food, is threatened by increasing ocean temperatures and melting ice near Antarctica, a student may write “Whales are losing their food source.” This point could then give way to other big ideas and questions like “How can we protect our whales?” and “What is the larger impact of global warming on different species?” The answers to these questions then become the basis for the argument.

Guiding Questions for the Reading and Note-making Process

- What do you notice?
- What do you know so far?
- What questions do you have?
- How would you answer those questions?
- What can you conclude?
- What is the author's argument?
- What is the author's point of view?
- What evidence does the author use to substantiate the argument?



Armed with data, students establish a claim.

Once writers have collected information on a topic, they need to re-read their notes and consider the questions they have asked. The questions that lead to high quality claims are interpretative questions that can be viewed from different angles. When students draw conclusions and attempt to answer a question of significance, they then have the ingredients necessary for a defensible claim.

According to Lucy Calkins in her **Curricular Plan for the Writing Workshop**, well-written claims also embed a counterclaim. By doing so, the writer has assurance that the claim is arguable. In order to write strong claims, students need exposure to many examples. Students may also benefit from the use of sentence frames.

“The only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion.”

John Stuart Mill,
British philosopher

Examples of Claims That Also Highlight an Opposing Argument

- **While some** U.S. officials **feel** that gray wolves no longer need to be included on the endangered species list, conservationists **argue that in reality** it is too soon.
- **Despite the fact** that the production of pesticides provides jobs, the health dangers associated with pesticide use **actually illustrates** that the benefits of producing pesticides are not greater than the risk.
- **Although some feel** that preparing students for standardized testing is “teaching to the test,” **one can argue** that teaching to the test is beneficial when the test focuses on essential content and skills as expected by the standards.

Sentence Frames to Assist Students When Writing Claims

Although some feel _____, one can argue that _____.

While some believe _____, in reality _____.

Despite the fact _____, _____ actually illustrates that _____.

Even though _____, it can be argued that _____.

Guiding Questions to Support the Development of Claims

- What is an important issue from my reading?
- What is an important idea from my reading?
- What am I wondering?
- What do I believe is the answer to my question?
- What is my stance?
- What is my position?
- Is my claim defensible?
- Can this claim be defended?



Just ASK Publications & Professional Development (Just ASK) is based in Alexandria, Virginia, USA. Established in 1989, Just ASK provides products and services for educators in formats that facilitate a shared understanding and use of best practice in teaching, learning, and leading in classrooms, schools, and districts in the 21st century.

Contact Just ASK to see how we can work together.

A common pitfall in the writing of claims is the attempt to write a thesis statement, or claim, too early or students create a claim that is indefensible and doesn't represent an argument. When writers attempt to begin by writing a claim rather than gathering data as a part of an inquiry process, they often generate claims that are based on assumptions, hunches, or hear say. This in turn creates problems for students as they attempt to substantiate their claims with evidence. As Lucy Calkins reminds us, claims should "encompass the counterargument within them. This is a valuable step to teach children because it guarantees a strong thesis, preventing children, at the very outset, from writing an argument essay from something that has no real opposition or potential for argument."

Another pitfall is that students may confuse claims and evidence. A claim is an arguable statement, whereas evidence is the information that is undisputed and supports the claim. Students will often confuse the two. In order to prevent this, prior to writing and finalizing their claims, students would benefit from practice distinguishing between the two and understanding the claim is the idea to be argued and the evidence does not contain an opinion. Providing students with examples and non-examples of claims and having them sort them is one way to show students the difference between the two.

Harvard's Project Zero provides a thinking and reasoning routine entitled **Claim/Support/Question**, available at www.visiblethinkingpz.org/VisibleThinking_html_files/03_ThinkingRoutines/03f_TruthRoutines.html. This routine can be

useful in helping students develop thoughtful interpretations. A checklist from the **International Reading Association** poses these questions to help students generate evidence-based claims.

- What words, lines, ideas, and phrases seem important and interesting in this text? (These ideas may come from responses to text dependent questions or other close reading activities.)
- What patterns do you see? What connections seem to exist among these important ideas and details?
- What evidence-based claims would these patterns allow you to make about the text? What conclusion that you can draw from the text that you could then support with evidence from the text?

When developing an argument, students should consider all angles.

It is important for students to understand that in order to present a solid argument, they need to know the evidence for the opposing arguments just as thoroughly as they know the evidence for the argument they are trying to make. One way to move students to this type of thinking is to consider one piece of evidence from more than one perspective. For example, extreme sports can be considered an empowering way to build confidence and discipline or a danger to young athletes. When reading a text and gathering evidence in support of a claim, the reader should continually be asking "What's another way to look at this?"

NEA provides a valuable resource that presents more than 40 controversial issues in a non-biased pro-con format at www.nea.org/tools/lessons/52698.htm

Guiding Questions for Considering Opposing Arguments

- What's another way to look at this?
- How could this evidence support both sides?
- What is the author arguing?
- What is the author's position?
- What was the author's purpose in writing this?
- Is there evidence to refute opposing arguments?
- Is there another side to this argument?
- Can I understand the point the writer is trying to make?



If students have written their claims to include the counter claim, they will already know which opposing argument to address. Students should then go to their notes and review the data that supports the counter argument. Then, it is their job to identify why this evidence is not supportive enough to make a case for the opposing argument. For example, students could say that it is inaccurate, incomplete, or misleading. Some of the evidence students have collected in support of their claim may in fact discredit the opposing evidence. When students choose to debate a claim, they can use words like in spite of, however, in fact, and actually.

Evidence determines the effectiveness of the argument.

Writers can gather evidence from a number of different sources, including print and electronic sources, as well as from observations, interviews, surveys, experiments, studies, and their personal experience.

Once evidence has been collected, it is not enough to just state the evidence. Writers also need to explain why and how the evidence supports their argument. What makes it a piece of evidence, after all, is its connection to the claim. The evidence the writer presents will be for or against a claim, and the writer should make that clear to the reader.

“Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction. The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Guiding Questions for Presenting Evidence

- What does that prove?
- Why is this evidence important? Why does it matter?
- What is your reason for including that piece of evidence?
- What are some strong reasons or examples that will support my claim?
- How should I present my evidence to my reader?
- How relevant is the evidence?
- Does the evidence presented align with the claim?
- Is there enough evidence to substantiate the claim?
- How is this evidence related to my claim?

As students are building expertise in using evidence in argumentative writing, three issues often surface.

- **Evidence that is irrelevant to the claim is included.**
 - When students are choosing which evidence to include in their argument, it is helpful to have them use Calkin’s **Boxes and Bullets** approach.
 - Students write their claim in a box.
 - Using bullets, students list their evidence under the box.
 - After writing each piece of evidence, students re-read what they have written and ask “Does this evidence support my claim?” If it does not, students cross out that piece of evidence and replace it with evidence that ties to the claim.
- **Insufficient evidence is provided.**

It is nearly impossible to make a good argument without enough evidence. Students can provide evidence in the form of quotations, summaries, anecdotes, facts, statistics, or examples.
- **The writing lacks warrants, or information on how the evidence supports the claim.**

Argument essays need to include warrants, or reasons the evidence supports the claim; additionally, warrants inform the writer as to whether or not they have included sufficient evidence. In order for students to write appropriate warrants, they need to see many examples and determine how the warrant makes an argument effective. Consider having students search for examples of warrants



in published writing. Prompts that scaffold student use of warrants include:

- If..., then...
- This suggests...
- This evidence shows...
- This evidence proves my claim by...

In conclusion, when students follow an inquiry process and collect data, wonder, and

interpret prior to establishing their claim, their arguments will inevitably be stronger. It is important to provide models of argument writing, ample time for inquiry, constructive and immediate feedback, and opportunities for students to verbally rehearse their arguments before putting them to paper. This scaffolding, discussion, and explicit instruction will lay the groundwork for high quality writing.

Just ASK consultants are ready to help you develop new or refine old units to align with the **Common Core State Standards**. For more information, contact us at www.justaskpublications.com.

Resources and References

Calkins, Lucy. *A Curricular Plan for the Writing Workshop, Grade 5, 2011-2012*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 2011.

Common Core Appendix A

In the discussion of the research supporting the key elements of the Common Core, the significance of argumentative writing in college and career readiness is described in detail on pages 23-25. Access at www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf

Hillocks, George, Jr. "Teaching Argument for Critical Thinking and Writing: An Introduction." *English Journal*. This article outlines what students need to know about argumentation for college and career, along with background on the construction of an argument. Access at www.ncte.org/library/nctefiles/ej0996focus.pdf

McCarthy, Ryan. "The Usual Suspect: Solving the #1 Problem in Argument Writing." Access at www.teachingchannel.org/blog/2014/05/22/biggest-problem-in-argument-writing/

www.teachingchannel.org/videos/support-claims-with-evidence-getty

Fifth graders engage in an activity titled claim-evidence-reasoning, where they practice substantiating their claims using evidence from photographs or text, and then reason about how their evidence supports their claim.

Evidence-Based Argument (EBA) Checklist. **International Reading Association**. Access at www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson-docs/EBAChecklist.pdf

Truth Routines. **Harvard's Project Zero**. This series of thinking routines is designed to help students understand multiple perspectives and explore truth. Access at www.visiblethinkingpz.org/VisibleThinking_html_files/03_ThinkingRoutines/03f_TruthRoutines.html

To subscribe to this free monthly e-newsletter please visit:
www.justaskpublications.com/commoncorenewsletter

© 2015 Just ASK Publications & Professional Development.

Permission is granted for reprinting and distribution of this newsletter for non-commercial use only. Please include the following citation on all copies:

Clayton, Heather. "Teaching Argument Writing: An Inquiry Process." *Making the Common Core Come Alive!* Volume IV, Issue I, 2015. Available at www.justaskpublications.com. Reproduced with permission of Just ASK Publications & Professional Development (Just ASK). © 2015 by Just ASK. All Rights Reserved.

www.justaskpublications.com | Phone: 800-940-5434 | Fax: 703-535-8502