

8 Strategies for Designing Lesson Plans to Meet the CCSS Opinion and Argument Writing Requirements



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For years, teachers have been designing persuasive writing lessons for their students. The Common Core State Standards are changing that by asking teachers to move away from persuasion and toward argumentation. Argumentation (called opinion writing in the elementary grades) is preferred by the CCSS because it is more rigorous and more in line with the kind of writing students will be expected to do in college and careers. In this white paper, we'll look at what argumentation really means, what the standards specifically require at each grade level, and how teachers can create lesson plans to meet these new requirements.

I'll also outline the following eight strategies for designing lesson plans to meet the new requirements:

- 1) Identify Fact vs. Opinion
- 2) Determine Credible Sources
- 3) Acknowledge Alternate or Opposing Claims
- 4) Vary Syntax
- 5) Assign a Combination of Short and Longer Writing Tasks
- 6) Use Mentor Texts
- 7) Involve Content-Area Teachers
- 8) Don't Forget Speaking and Listening

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Shifting from Persuasion to Argument

Persuasive writing is based on emotional appeals to the audience, whereas argumentation is based on logic and evidence. According to the standards:

A logical argument ... convinces the audience because of the perceived merit and reasonableness of the claims and proofs offered rather than either the emotions the writing evokes in the audience or the character or credentials of the writer. (Common Core State Standards, Appendix A, p. 24)

Persuasive writing is not as rigorous because it allows students to write solely based on their experiences and emotions, without having to gather evidence and facts or consider the other side. Benjamin and Hugelmeier provide an example of how the genres differ:

If a student were asked to persuade her parents to get her a four-legged pet, she might resort to whatever works between her and her parents. Whining, pouting, insisting, and threatening to run away would be fair game, assuming such techniques have worked in the past. If she were asked to create an argument for why she should have a four-legged pet, and if the audience were less subjective than her parents—let’s say, the directors of an animal shelter—she should offer evidence about her suitability as a potential pet owner: her history taking care of someone or something that depended on her, her knowledge, her schedule, her physical strength. The Common Core definitely seeks to wean students from emotional responses and transition them into more substantial reasoning. (p. 59)

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Since argumentation requires more “substantial reasoning,” teachers will need to show students age-appropriate ways to include reasons and evidence in their writing. The Common Core State Standards are very specific about the amount and kind of evidence students need to include at each grade level. Let’s take a look.

How the Argumentation Requirements Get More Rigorous at Each Grade Level

In elementary school, 30 percent of the writing that students do should be opinion-based. In middle school, 35 percent should be argumentation, and in high school, 40 percent should be argumentation. It’s important for teachers to understand what’s required at all grade levels, not just their own, so they can build instruction appropriately and review where needed. The following table summarizes the Common Core’s opinion and argument writing requirements at each grade level. When something is a key shift from the previous grade level, I’ve highlighted it in **boldface**.

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K	Students need to form an opinion .
1	Students need to include a reason for their opinion and provide a sense of closure .
2	Students need to provide linking words to connect their opinion and reasons; they also need to write a concluding statement or section .
3	In addition to the above requirements, students now need to think about organization , and they need to use linking phrases , not just linking words.
4	Students need to use reasons, information , and facts to support their opinion.
5	Students need to group their reasons in a logical way. They need to use linking words, phrases, and clauses to tie their opinions to their reasons.
6	The requirements shift from writing opinions to writing arguments . Students need to make a claim . They must effectively introduce, support, and organize their claims and evidence. They must use credible sources , and they must maintain a formal style .
7	Now, students not only introduce, support, and organize their own claims, but they also acknowledge alternate/opposing claims . In addition, they must gather evidence by using accurate , credible sources. They need to maintain a formal style.
8	Students not only acknowledge alternate claims, but they also distinguish these claims from their own. The other requirements from grades 6–7 still stand.
9-10	Once they are in high school, students make more precise claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence . They develop claims and counterclaims fairly ; they anticipate the audience’s knowledge level and concerns ; and they maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.
11-12	In addition to meeting the above requirements, students now make precise and knowledgeable claims ; they establish the significance of their claims; they acknowledge the audience’s knowledge level, concerns, values , and possible biases ; and they must use varied syntax .

As the table shows, the argument writing standards change in two main ways as you move up the grade levels. Students are expected to have higher-quality, more sophisticated evidence, and they’re expected to use more complex language and be more aware of audience and purpose.

Creating Opinion- and Argument-Writing Lessons

Once you understand the Common Core’s detailed requirements, you’re ready to create lesson plans. Look at the wording of your grade-level standard, and think about what lessons and mini-lessons are essential to helping students meet that standard. Here are some examples:

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- In fourth grade, students need to use facts in their writing, so you may need to spend a class period or two reviewing the difference between fact and opinion. You can have students identify facts and opinions in what they're reading (or in their own experiences) before you ask them to write their own facts and opinions. Integrating reading and writing is a key principle of the Common Core State Standards.
- In sixth grade, students must use credible sources. You might want to decide, as a class, on criteria for determining whether a source is credible and trustworthy (for example, when it was last updated, who the author or agency of the site is, whether the site is trying to sell you something, etc.) (Davis, *Common Core Literacy Lesson Plans: Ready-to-Use Resources, 6–8*, p. 70). Then give students practice analyzing sample websites as a class or with partners before they go to work selecting and evaluating their own sources.
- In seventh grade, students must acknowledge alternate or opposing claims. Teach a lesson in which you have students read one argument that acknowledges the other side and one that doesn't. Have students decide which argument is stronger. That will help students discover the importance of acknowledging the other side. (Students need to know why something matters before they're willing to try it!) Also have students look at the way that an author acknowledges conflicting evidence or viewpoints. While you're at it, use this as an opportunity to teach academic vocabulary such as *argument*, *evidence*, *claim*, *point of view*, *viewpoints*, etc. (Davis, *Common Core Literacy Lesson Plans: Ready-to-Use Resources, 6–8*, p. 39). Then give students sentence frames or specific examples of how they can acknowledge the other side in their own writing.
- In eleventh and twelfth grades, teachers should include lessons on how to vary syntax. Share different ways of varying syntax, such as beginning each sentence with an introductory phrase or clause; using a question, exclamation, or command to vary a string of declarative sentences; placing a shorter sentence among longer ones and vice versa; and using varied punctuation to put words, phrases, and clauses together (Davis, *Common Core Literacy Lesson Plans: Ready-to-Use Resources, 9–12*, p. 163). High school students are also expected to anticipate their audience's values and possible biases. Teach students to write for a variety of different audiences and see how their approach would change for each one. Using different audiences helps students learn to think critically, and it also helps make your teaching more authentic and therefore relevant to students. Students won't just be writing "for the teacher" but for real purposes.

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Other Tips for Creating Opinion and Argument Lesson Plans

- **Assign a Combination of Short and Longer Writing Tasks.** Not every argument writing assignment has to be a long one. For example, in elementary school, you can "create quick writing tasks by having students write (or draw) for three or five minutes in response to a prompt such as 'What is your favorite toy (or book or whatever)? Why is it your favorite?'" These quick tasks let students focus on forming an opinion and giving an opinion or two" (Davis, *Common Core Literacy Lesson Plans: Ready-to-Use Resources, K–5*, p. 207). In the older grades, students can create a T-chart or do a quick freewrite in response to a prompt, in addition to completing longer, more in-depth writing assignments.

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- **Use Mentor Texts.** As mentioned earlier, it's important to have students read argument texts before they write their own. These texts can then serve as models, or mentors, for their own writing. Benjamin and Hugelmeier recommend having students analyze editorials on a regular basis. Students should determine the main issue in the editorial, say why the issue is important, and explain why it's controversial. Then students should analyze the writer's argument and techniques by highlighting sentences or questions that state the author's main point (opinion); circling any statistics in the editorial; looking at cause-effect and if-then relationships; checking for logical fallacies; and looking at diction, especially words with positive or negative connotations (Benjamin and Hugelmeier, p. 60).
- **Involve Content-Area Teachers.** English teachers can create writing tasks that take into consideration what students are studying in science and social studies classes. Students should also be reading mentor texts in those content-area classes. Social studies teachers can have students analyze arguments in historical texts, and science teachers can have students analyze arguments in magazine or newspaper articles. Argumentation should be taught across the curriculum because in real life, the genre is indeed used for all kinds of subjects and purposes.
- **Don't Forget Speaking and Listening.** The writing standards are not meant to be taught in isolation. We've discussed how to incorporate reading standards; don't forget to consider speaking and listening standards, too. For example, students can flesh out their topics with a partner or group. Students can work with partners to find holes in one another's logic and point out opposing arguments that might have been overlooked. Students can present their arguments using multimedia rather than just typing up their final drafts.

Conclusion

Teaching argument will give students the skills they need to read and write critically and logically. This kind of writing will not only prepare students for college and careers, but also help them understand the importance of considering other perspectives in life.

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