

Guidelines and Resources for Teaching Informative Writing

Using language to discuss factual ideas in a logical format is a vital 21st Century skill used in academic, personal and professional circles. To that end, across states' standards, students are being expected to write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content. As its name implies, informative writing is meant to inform the reader about a specific topic, which can range from an idea, to a belief system, process, procedure, or historical event.

Main Ideas	Additional Guidelines	Links
<p>Informative writing requires effective prompts to provide clarity about the purpose of the assignment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unlike argumentative writing with a claim and counterclaim structure, informative/explanatory writing informs the reader following a focused and logical course of explanation about a topic supported by evidence and explanations derived from credible sources to substantiate the ideas contained in the piece of writing. ● Key words in informative writing prompts include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Define</i> ○ <i>Describe</i> ○ <i>Explain</i> ○ <i>Explore</i> ○ <i>Show</i> ○ <i>Demonstrate</i> ○ <i>Tell why or how</i> ● Writing prompts that contain this sort of language avoid any confusion about the purpose of the writing--to inform the reader about a specific topic. Prompts can be derived from literature read in class, from current news stories, topics related to what is being studied in specific courses, and a host of other sources. Many publications such as <i>Time for Kids</i> or <i>Newsela</i> online contain a myriad of informational articles from which writing prompts could be derived. They are also great samples of informative writing that students should study and discuss to become familiar with it. ● It is important that students are interested in the topics they are being asked to write about. Providing a list of options or a set of criteria for choosing a topic from a library's online or paper resource bank is an excellent way to provide students choices for the 	<p>Sample Informational Writing Prompts PDF (Secondary)</p> <p>Writingfix Practice Prompts for Middle School</p> <p>Writingfix Lesson Plans for Informative Writing (Elementary)</p> <p>Informative Essay Topics</p> <p>Informative Essay Topics for Elementary Students</p> <p>Student Tips for the Informative Writing Experience</p> <p>Brainstorming from University of North Carolina Writing Center</p> <p>West Virginia- Brainstorming and More</p>

Main Ideas	Additional Guidelines	Links
	<p>project.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Brainstorming about all the angles and avenues one could research about a broad topic helps students with the prewriting process and provides a narrowed topics list sufficient for research. ● If students haven't had a great deal of practice with brainstorming, this technique should be modeled with the whole class or in small groups first. Students should individually brainstorm before they write using whatever method seems appropriate: journaling, drawing, graphic organizers, KWL charts, etc. 	
<p>The basic structure of informative writing is established with a good thesis statement and sound paragraph structure. These elements of structure are best presented to students in the form of samples of writing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In any type of writing instruction, students need to interact with samples of the type of writing they are being asked to create. This practice with samples helps clarify for students what a good piece of informative writing looks like. In addition, it is very important that student also have an opportunity to clearly understand the criteria of strong informative writing by which their work will be assessed. ● Teachers should use not only ask students to engage with sample essays, but also use informative texts of all kinds in the classroom to encourage students to become more critical readers. The more students engage in reading informational texts, the more they will understand how to write them. ● Using sample essays, teachers should focus on the components of a good thesis statement. It is helpful to read through and discuss a few samples of informative writing with the students, focusing on the thesis statements. ● Directly related to the thesis statement are the paragraphs of the piece of writing. Using the same samples, ask students to determine the link between the thesis statement and the paragraphs that follow. ● Using the text of the sample essays to explain their observations, ask the students to evaluate the effectiveness of the thesis statements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ "What do you expect to read about in this essay?" ○ "What subtopics do you expect to read about in each body paragraph?" ○ "Does the writer address all the components of the thesis?" ○ "Does the body deviate from what is stated in the thesis?" ● Emphasize the power of topic sentences, thoughtful paragraph structure, and the necessity of expounding upon and explaining the evidence. 	<p>Writing Informative/Explanatory Essays</p> <p>Examples of Informative Essays (middle school to college)</p> <p>Fourth Grade Nonfiction Writing Samples from GreatKids</p> <p>Fifth Grade Nonfiction Writing Samples from GreatKids</p> <p>How to Write a Thesis Statement</p> <p>Teaching Informational Paragraph Writing- Including Templates and Videos</p> <p>Writing Checklist for an</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Generally speaking, the paragraphs of informative writing follow a basic structure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Topic Sentence</i>: This sentence should state the subtopic addressed by the paragraph as it relates to the thesis. ○ <i>Evidence #1</i>: This evidence substantiates the subtopic of the paragraph in the form of a salient quote or paraphrase that is properly cited. ○ <i>Explanation #1</i>: This explanation should expound upon the quote or paraphrase, explaining its purpose and relevance to the subtopic. The explanation is typically two to three sentences. ○ <i>Evidence #2</i>: This evidence is another substantiation of the subtopic in the form of a quote or paraphrase that is properly cited. ○ <i>Explanation #2</i>: This explanation should also expound upon the quote or paraphrase, explaining its purpose and relevance to the subtopic. ● Note that there are many variants to this structure. Writing about a process, for example, would yield a different structure that would likely be a sequence of descriptive steps. ● Ask the students to use the sample essays to outline the organization of ideas. Have them identify the author's purpose as stated in the thesis. In addition, ask them to identify the topic sentences for each paragraph as well as the evidence and explanation for each topic sentence. ● Using sample essays, ask specific questions about expounding and explaining: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ "Where does the author provide evidence for his or her first point?" ○ "Is there more that should have been explained about the final point?" ○ "What questions might the reader still have about the subtopic addressed in the second paragraph?" ● Consider also having students practice evaluating the sample essays using the rubric that will be used to eventually assess their own work. ● As students begin writing their first draft, remind them to consider the links between their thesis statements and their body paragraphs. Sometimes they need to adjust their thesis statements as they work because new ideas and developments arise, or they may need to find more information about one of their subtopics. 	<p>Informative Essay</p>

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<p>Students also need to consider the relationship between the writer, subject, and audience as they formulate their ideas. They also need to make certain that their information is true and accurate and from credible sources.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students should be familiar with Aristotle's Rhetorical Triangle. This includes both the interplay between the speaker/writer, the subject, and the audience. It also includes the balance of the appeals to the audience in the form of ethos, pathos, and logos. ● The role of ethos--or the ethical appeal to the audience where the writer's credibility is established-- matters a great deal in informative writing. It is assumed that the information contained in the essay is true and accurate. This means that students need to be able to find and recognize credible sources from which they derive their information. ● There is so much information available to students that they need some guidance for how to determine what is credible and what is not. For example, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Physical publications such as books and reputable periodicals are generally reliable (unless their information is out of date). ○ Websites with URLs that end with an ".org" or a ".edu" are more likely to be well-researched and factual than other sites. ○ Wikipedia is generally not considered a credible source, but often the Wikipedia articles have references with links at the bottom of the page that are credible sources. ● While the Rhetorical Triangle is often used in opinion and argumentative writing, it is also effective with informative writing. Namely, students should consider their audience and their topic for their informative piece. If their peers are their audience, they may include different sorts of information or even anecdotes that relate to their common experience. If their audience is younger students, or older students or adults, the content may change. ● Ultimately, writers need to learn to think like their readers. There are scaffolding strategies that help students write descriptively and informatively so that they create a common experience with their readers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For example, ask students to create word pictures that their readers can see in 70 words or fewer. In small groups, students should individually describe slightly different objects and then switch with other groups and try to match the descriptions with their objects. Ask students to apply this descriptive strategy in their writing by creating word pictures to connect visually with the reader. 	<p>Rhetorical Triangle- ethos, pathos, logos definitions</p> <p>Rhetorical Triangle Diagram</p> <p>How Can I Tell if a Website Is Reliable?</p> <p>Criteria to Evaluate the Credibility of WWW Resources</p> <p>Finding Reliable Sources Video (Elementary)</p> <p>Finding Reliable Sources Using Google Video Lecture (Part 1)</p> <p>Finding Reliable Sources Using Google Video Lecture (Part 2)</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Challenge students to create a vivid analogy for what they are trying to explain to the reader: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explain how a classroom is like a garden. What is the role of the teacher? The students? ▪ Explain how ignoring global warming is like trying to stop an ocean wave. ▪ Explain how a negative attitude is like a contagious disease. ○ Provide sentence starters to not only help students elaborate on their ideas, but also engage the reader: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ At first, _____, but now.... ▪ This is similar to... (another text, a world issue, etc.) ▪ This is different than... ▪ Now it is time to consider... ▪ This is important because... ▪ Nonetheless, ... ▪ Some people might think... but ... because... ▪ Another question this raises is... 	
<p>Rubrics provide students clear expectations about what a good piece of writing looks like. As a result, rubrics are the perfect companion for effective feedback that leads to more successful revision. Rubrics also support the opportunity for students to engage in personal reflection about their writing, which helps students become better writers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● As students are being introduced to a new writing assignment, they need to have access to the rubric that will be used to assess their work. Teachers should refer to the specifics of the rubric when explaining the expectations for the assignment while students are following along. ● One of the most widely used sources for writing rubrics is the 6+1 Traits of Writing in which the components of writing are broken down into six descriptors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ideas convey the main message. ○ Organization deals with the internal structure of the piece. ○ Voice communicates the personal tone and flavor of the author's message. ○ Word Choice consists of the vocabulary a writer chooses to convey meaning. ○ Sentence Fluency is the rhythm and flow of the language. ○ Conventions address the mechanical correctness such as punctuation, spelling and grammar. ○ The +1 is presentation, which deals with the overall look, formatting and neatness of the piece of writing. 	<p>Informative Writing with Self-regulated Strategy Development (Primary Grades)</p> <p>6 +1 Trait® Writing Model of Instruction & Assessment</p> <p>Writingfix 6 +1 Traits Activities</p> <p>6 +1 Writing Rubric for Grades K-2</p> <p>6 +1 Trait Rubrics: Early Elementary Example</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There are abundant resources online for samples of these rubrics and ways to incorporate the traits into everyday use in the writing classroom. ● Checklists also work to keep students on track and informed about what should be contained in the piece of writing during the writing process. ● Consider using the rubric for every evaluation of every draft as a tool for communication for what needs to be improved. Focus the rubric on specific concepts on which the students have been working. For example, if organization through the use of effective paragraph structure has been a focus, then make sure the rubric reflects that concept. ● When peers are looking at each other's work and providing feedback, they need a checklist derived from the rubric, or the rubric itself to provide feedback. And they need instructions for how to peer assess effectively. ● A great way to help students become familiar with what is expected as outlined in the rubric is to have the students work in small groups to evaluate sample papers using the rubric. The small groups then report their evaluation to the larger class. ● Building in classroom time for teacher and student conferencing is well worth the effort. Verbally discussing their writing in a conference helps students focus on the points they are trying to make. One of the first questions you should ask your students in the conference is something like, "What is this piece of writing about?" or "What are you trying to tell your reader?" ● When conferencing with your students, use the language of the rubric as you discuss revisions. Consider the following examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ "This paragraph contains an excellent idea, but you are missing a topic sentence that introduces the idea and organizes the paragraph. What is this paragraph about?" Write down what the student says and ask, "How can you turn what you just said into a topic sentence?" ○ "You have several really long sentences that may confuse your reader and several start with "Then". How might you create more variety in the sentence lengths and in your word choice?" Show the student an example and ask, "Where else could you use more variety?" ○ "Let's focus on an introduction for your ideas here. Can you tell me why you are interested in this topic? Why do you think other people might be interested in 	<p>6 +1 Traits Rubric-- Student Friendly Version</p> <p>6 +1 Traits Rubric from Readwritethink.org</p> <p>Informative Writing Checklist Sample</p>

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	<p>this topic?” Write down what the student says. “How can you turn what you just said into a few introductory sentences?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In order to successfully revise their papers, students must be able to find, correct, or clarify the problems or errors in their <i>own</i> writing. They need to have ample and guided practice doing so in sample papers or even with their peers’ work. ● Challenging students to make a list of questions they anticipate their reader might have about their topic is a good strategy to help them walk in their reader’s’ shoes. ● Students also need to spend time re-reading their work using the rubric and/or a checklist to guide their re-reading. They need to know that it is important to rewrite, rebuild, reorganize, and further develop ideas in their writing. Consider allowing students to revise their papers until they make all the necessary adjustments to have a sound piece of writing. This may mean that more than one “final” draft is submitted and evaluated. ● Allow students time to reflect about the writing process and their final product. The practice of setting individual goals for an assignment and then reflecting on them or responding to a reflective prompt is a powerful tool for helping students improve their writing skills and their critical thinking skills. Ask students thoughtful questions such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ List your goals for this assignment. Were you able to meet them? Why or why not? ○ What is the most important thing you learned from this assignment? ○ What was the most challenging part of this assignment for you? Why? How did you deal with it? ○ What did you learn about yourself as a writer during this project? ○ What goals will you set for yourself as a writer to improve your writing? Who will help you to achieve this goal? ○ How will you know when you are successful? 	

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