

OVERVIEW of the WRITING STANDARDS

WHAT DO THEY SAY AND WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

If we were asked to describe the two or three most striking features of the Common Core State Standards, one of the things we'd say straight away is that the standards place a tremendous emphasis on writing. In effect, the standards refocus the nation on students' proficiency as writers. NCLB, the last large-scale reform movement in literacy, called for an emphasis on phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Writing was nowhere in the picture. In the Common Core State Standards, in contrast, writing is treated as an equal partner to reading, and more than this, writing is assumed to be the vehicle through which a great deal of the reading work and reading assessments will occur. The CCSS, then, return writing to its place as one of the basics of education. In order to help you grasp the Common Core's rallying cry around writing, in this chapter we discuss the standards' emphasis on

- three types of writing
- the writing process
- the quality of student writing
- writing as integral even for very young students
- writing across all disciplines and for real purposes

THE STANDARDS' EMPHASIS ON THREE TYPES OF WRITING

In the prelude to the Common Core standards, there is a section titled "Key Features of the Standards" (8). This synopsis emphasizes that although

the writing process applies to all kinds of writing, different types of writing place different demands on students:

The Standards acknowledge the fact that whereas some writing skills, such as the ability to plan, revise, edit, and publish, are applicable to many types of writing, other skills are more properly defined in terms of specific writing types: arguments, informative/explanatory texts, and narratives.

The standards themselves are organized in a way that highlights the demands these three broad categories of writing place on the writer. The first standard delineates expectations for opinion and argument writing, the second, for informational writing, the third, for narrative writing. Although these three “types of writing” standards represent just under a third of the ten standards, if one were to count the pages devoted to the writing standards and count the pages devoted to explicating the three types of writing, one would find that these first three standards occupy fully half of the CCSS for writing. The later standards illuminate how students should go about doing the work of the first three standards. For example, standard 5 is the writing process standard, and presumably, students will use the writing process that is detailed in this standard as they write the argument, informational, and narrative texts described in standards 1–3.

It is interesting to note that the standards refer to these as *types* of writing, not as *genres*. This makes sense because within any one type of writing, one can lodge many different genres of writing. In the New Standards Project, an earlier effort to create nationwide standards, the committee of twenty who wrote those standards (which included Lucy Calkins) wrestled with the issue of kinds versus structures versus types versus genres of writing and came to the decision that the whole world of writing could be divided into five (not three) kinds of writing: narrative, informational, persuasion and opinion, functional and procedural, and poetry. The Common Core’s divisions are roughly in line with those earlier ones, although functional and procedural writing is now grouped with informational writing, and poetry is overlooked. In the New Standards effort, the committee created a chart that delineated the genres of writing that could be classified within any one of the types of writing. You might, with colleagues, try jotting down the genres you would put under these major categories, and then consider how often your students have

opportunities to engage in the three main types of writing. You will probably come up with a list like this:

- **Narrative Writing:** personal narrative, fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, narrative memoir, biography, narrative nonfiction
- **Persuasive/Opinion/Argument Writing:** persuasive letter, review, personal essay, persuasive essay, literary essay, historical essay, petition, editorial, op-ed column
- **Informational and Functional/Procedural Writing:** fact sheet, news article, feature article, blog, website, report, analytic memo, research report, nonfiction book, how-to book, directions, recipe, lab report

For each of these kinds of writing, the Common Core State Standards delineate the way in which expectations grow each year, standing on the shoulders of the preceding year. And so, for example, first graders are expected to write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic of the book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply a reason to support that opinion, and provide some sense of closure. By sixth grade, students are expected to write arguments (not opinions) to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence. In these arguments, students are expected to introduce the claim(s) and organize the reasons and evidence clearly; support claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence, using credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text; use words, phrases, and clauses to clarify the relationships among claims and reasons; establish a formal style; and provide a concluding statement or section that follows from the argument presented. You'll want to look yourself to see how these expectations escalate for twelfth grade!

The standards not only describe the progression of skill development that is expected to occur across grades in a spiral writing curriculum in which one grade builds upon the next, but also provide annotated exemplar texts to illustrate what these pieces of writing might look like and to answer the question, How good is good enough? When looking at the pieces that are provided as illustrations of one type of writing or another, it is important to note that even the pieces selected as exemplars do not adhere to all of the defining characteristics of a genre.

The standards not only define and describe the three kinds of writing and show how students' work with each of those kinds of writing should progress across the years, but also call for a distribution of writing experi-

ences that gives students roughly equal amounts of time and instruction in argument, informative, and narrative writing. The balance tilts more in favor of narrative writing in the elementary grades and then tilts toward argument and informational writing in high school.

In the Common Core, the discussion of the distribution of writing between these types of texts is situated under the subheading of “Shared Responsibility” (4) as part of an emphasis on writing instruction belonging in the hands of all disciplines and every teacher. That is, if fifth-grade students are expected to write narratives 35% of the time, information and explanations 35% of the time, and opinions and arguments 30% of the time, and writing is expected to be woven into math, social studies, science, gym, and music, then presumably a good deal of the explanatory and informational writing will occur in science (lab reports), in math (math journals reflecting on the students’ processes), in social studies (summaries of texts read, responses to questions asking students to synthesize information from several sources), and in reading (reading notebook entries, quick analytic jottings, preparations for partnership and book club conversations). This suggests that the CCSS recommend that a large portion of the writing done during ELA be narrative writing. Our next chapter, on the standards’ expectations for narrative writing, illuminates this point further.

THE STANDARDS’ EMPHASIS ON THE WRITING PROCESS

Writing standard 5 describes the writing process, and standard 10 describes the need to write routinely as part of that process. Both standards will be an integral part of students being able to work toward all the other writing standards as well. The grade level specifics of anchor standard 5 are almost the same across all the grades. Always, this standard says that students should be able to “develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, [and] editing” (18) with expectations for revision increasing with age and with expectations for independence increasing as well. Anchor standard 10 calls for students to “write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two)” (18). These are not low expectations!

Let’s start by noting that the standards call for students to write often. “Write routinely” means to make writing a habit. Even noted writers describe how they have to push themselves to ensure that they write every

day. Novelist Margaret Atwood, who has published dozens of fiction and nonfiction books, and has received almost every known award for her writing, claims: “The fact is the blank pages inspire me with terror. What will I put on them? Will it be good enough? Will I have to throw it out? The trick is to sit at the desk anyway, every day” (Murray 1990). It is not surprising that the standards emphasize writing often. Writing is just like any other practice—playing piano, running, knitting. The more opportunity you have for practice, the better you get.

The image of a routine for writing is not just about sitting down to write, however. A writing routine involves understanding what it means to work at your writing. Writing anchor 5 states that writers will “develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach” (18). The CCSS are closely aligned, then, with the practices researched by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Don Murray, documented in *A Writer Teaches Writing* (2003). Murray described how journalists learn, even when writing to deadline, to revise on the run, to try out different leads and endings, to consider and reconsider each word, comma, sentence structure in order to convey precise meaning; they know that writing is a process.

Volume is also related to rate, and the standards are very specific about the expectations for production. Fourth graders are expected to produce a minimum of one typed page in a sitting, and fifth graders, a minimum of two typed pages in a sitting. That level of production requires practice. If you’ve ever practiced piano scales, you know that when you first sit down after a long stretch away from the piano, your fingers are slow. It’s the same if you haven’t exercised in a while, or if you haven’t picked up knitting needles in five years. You know the skills, but your legs or fingers don’t respond with the speed you expected. On the other hand, as you begin to knit, or run, or play piano, or write, you’ll find that for every day you do it, the sheer discipline of moving your pen across the page, or your fingers across the keyboard, you will become faster and more fluent.

THE STANDARDS’ EMPHASIS ON THE QUALITY OF STUDENT WRITING

Although a reader of the writing standards will probably notice first that the standards emphasize three broadly defined types of writing and second that the standards call for frequent engagement in the writing process,