Promoting Critical Writing and Reflection

When we write, we learn what we think. Writing is both a tool for and an outcome of learning. The Common Core State Standards for Writing emphasize writing in both ways.

Writing is a way for students of “offering and supporting opinions, demonstrating understanding of the subjects they are studying, and conveying real and imagined experiences and events” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, [CCSSI] 2010a, p. 18). Likewise, writing allows students to “develop the capacity to build knowledge on a subject through research projects and to respond analytically to literary and informational sources” (CCSSI, 2010a, p. 18).

Common Core State Standards: Writing

According to the Common Core State Standards, strong and literate writing includes four different domains:

- Various text types and purposes:
  - Clear arguments with supportive claims, logical reasoning, and ample evidence.
  - Informative/explanatory texts that convey complex ideas.
  - Narratives with rich details and clear sequencing.

- Production and distribution of writing:
  - Coherent writing that is appropriate to audience and purpose.
  - Planning, revising, editing, and rewriting process.
  - Use of technology to publish and collaborate.

- Use of research to build and present knowledge:
  - Research projects based on significant questions.
Use and analysis of research materials.
Evidence from literary or informational texts as support.
A wide range of writing over extended and short time frames

The Common Core State Standards break down the four domains so that students are college- and career-ready in writing by graduation.

As it does in the other knowledge strands, the standards alter the emphasis to critical thinking. In writing, this means moving away from a concentration on narrative and personal writing to an emphasis on logical argument and research-based, informative writing. In history/social studies, this means writing arguments that are focused on discipline-specific content and writing informational texts that include the narration of historical events.

The standards state, “The ability to write logical arguments based on substantive claims, sound reasoning, and relevant evidence is a cornerstone...with opinion writing—a basic form of argument—extending down into the earliest grades” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). The standards also emphasize research projects, both short and long, to promote written analysis and presentation.

According to the Publishers’ Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy (Coleman and Pimentel, 2011), student writing should progress over their years in school to reflect these proportions:

- In elementary school, 30 percent of student writing should be argument, 35 percent explanation/information, and 35 percent narrative.
- In middle school, 35 percent of student writing should be argument, 35 percent explanation/information, and 30 percent narrative.
- In high school, 40 percent of student writing should be argument, 40 percent explanation/information, and 20 percent narrative. (p. 10)
**Writing and Reflection Strategies for History/Social Studies**

Teachers can use writing in the classroom to meet the Common Core State Standards in countless ways.

**Reading Journal/Learning Log: Preparing for Analysis**

Students divide a page of a journal into two columns.

- In the left column, they summarize what they have read, note important quotations, and jot down significant details.

- In the right column, students record observations, inferences, and questions about the text.

Often the seeds for longer analytical writing pieces can be found in a student’s reading journal/learning log. Teachers can impose certain structures on reading logs to help students gather ideas and evidence as they read.

For example, to tailor the reading journal for a specific writing assignment in which students analyze a historical movement and assert an opinion or argument about that movement, students might use the reading journal as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date and Reading Assignment</th>
<th>Notes about the Movement (directly from the text)</th>
<th>Student Analysis (based on the text)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• summary of key features of the movement</td>
<td>• observations about the movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• important quotations about this movement</td>
<td>• inferences about the movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• significant details about the movement, including important figures and events</td>
<td>• questions about the text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After students complete their reading, they can use their reading journal to trace their thinking. Using this tool, they can write an analytical essay in which they assert a position on a historical movement and defend it.

**Compare and Contrast Sources: Gathering and Evaluating Evidence for Research**

As early as kindergarten, the CCSS have students participating in some form of research. But simply retrieving materials on a topic is not true research. In this activity, teachers can help students gather the kind of evidence that will best support their writing.

The teacher provides students with at least two websites on a particular research topic (an author, a book, etc.). One source should be a strong source; the other should be a poor source. In small groups, students analyze the sources by answering some of the following questions:

- Is the source appropriate?
- Is the source reliable?
- Is the source authoritative?
- Is the source long enough to develop ideas?

**RAFT (Role-Audience-Format-Topic): Developing a Sense of Audience and Purpose**

The RAFT strategy helps students consider critically their role as a writer, the audience they are writing for, the various forms of writing, and the topic they will be writing about. RAFT writing prompts help students consider multiple perspectives and purpose.

The RAFT writing strategy has four components that help students digest information as both readers and writers:
- **Role** of the writer—Who are you as a writer? Are you a reporter? An observer? An eyewitness?
- **Audience**—Who are you writing for: teacher, classmates, community?
- **Format**—What form will your writing take: essay, article, letter, poem?
- **Topic**—What is the subject of the writing?

Brainstorm together or assign a topic. Students think about RAFT and choose a role, an audience, a format, and a topic to respond to the text. For example, students who have just completed a biography of Karl Marx might decide to use RAFT as follows:
- **Role**—a friend of Karl Marx
- **Audience**—Karl Marx
- **Format**—letter
- **Topic**—what he likes and doesn’t like about Marx’s ideas

**Reasons and Evidence Chart: Supporting a Claim**

The standards emphasize the importance of supporting a point of view or argument. To help students think about and organize their support, encourage them to use a chart like the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion or Argument:</th>
<th>Evidence (facts, expert opinion, anecdotes, examples, and quotations)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
A Note on Reflection

Although the Common Core State Standards do not target reflection as a specific knowledge area, reflection in all of the knowledge strands—reading, language, speaking and listening, and writing—promotes literacy in students. As students reflect, they make inferences and draw conclusions, revise their thinking, extend and refine their knowledge, and analyze information.

Many of the approaches you have already learned in this course promote reflective thinking through all the reading stages; for example, pre-reading questions ask students to make predictions, during-reading questions ask students to consider their impressions before the reading is even completed, and post-reading questions ask students to consider how their ideas may have changed after reading a text.

As you guide your students toward true literacy, consider how often you use reflective questions in your classroom. Are you too often asking factual questions? Are you accepting student answers without requiring support for them? Do you encourage students to think on a meta-level about their own understanding by asking them to identify strategies that help them?