

Argument and the CCSS

ARGUMENT DEFINED

What distinguishes an argument from informative writing is the goal. While the purpose of the latter is to develop and explain a topic, an argument is a logical analysis that provides evidence and reasons in defense of a claim. Arguments are designed to convince a reader that the explanation of a concept or idea is sound or the resolution of a problem or issue is correct. Arguments are also used to change a reader's point of view or move them to act.

Arguments appear in many different disciplines for different reasons, but all arguments rely on evidence to make a point, advance an interpretation, or synthesize findings and support hypotheses. Formulating an argument causes writers to critically assess different viewpoints for their strengths and weaknesses based upon the evidence available. In doing so they not only evaluate the truth of the information the argument is based upon but also assess the logic of the argument they are constructing out of that evidence.

WRITING ARGUMENTS AND THE CCSS

While the Common Core State Standards emphasize both informative writing as well as the craft of narrative, writing arguments receives particular emphasis due to its importance for college and career readiness. **ANCHOR WRITING STANDARD 1** explicitly calls on students to “write arguments to support claims” and employ “valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” in their analysis of the topic in question (**ANCHOR WRITING STANDARD 1**). The ability to perform research, critically assess complex text, build new knowledge out of evidence, anticipate and address counterclaims, and then argue for one's viewpoint in writing is an essential capacity for whatever path students take after graduating from high school.

Although younger students are not required to advance full-fledged arguments, the standards instruct teachers to guide them in formulating elements of arguments and sharpening their ability to articulate opinions by providing examples, offering reasons, and explaining viewpoints. Conversely, by high school students are expected to be able to incorporate and support counterarguments that challenge the thesis.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ARGUMENTS

- a claim that articulates an opinion or viewpoint
- an organizational text structure that supports the opinion or claim logically
- evidence and examples from sources that support and develop the claim
- logical reasons that frame the evidence and demonstrate understanding
- transitional language that creates cohesion between the thesis, reasons and evidence
- A concluding statement that follows from the opinion or claim

PERSUASIVE VERSUS ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

Persuasive writing is characterized by appeals to factors outside of the text in order to convince the reader to agree with the position the writer is asserting. Appeals to the credibility or authority of the writer are common in persuasive writing, as establishing a bond with the reader is a key element in writing of this sort. Persuasive writing can also appeal to self-interest or the emotions of the audience in order to sway their thinking. Argumentative writing differs in offering logical analyses that are meant to be evaluated on the basis of their merit and the reasonableness of the claims being made, rather than looking outside the text to the character of the writer or the way the appeal makes the reader feel. Argumentative writing therefore aligns closely with the expectations of text-dependent close reading, and is a particularly important form of writing students must master in preparation for college and career.

OPINIONS AND CLAIMS DEFINED

At each grade level **WRITING STANDARD 1** spells out expectations with regard to writing arguments or opinion pieces. While there are substantial differences among the grade levels in terms of expectations regarding the thesis, there is a common emphasis on students formulating opinions (Grades K-5) or claims (Grades 6-12) that can be logically supported in an organized fashion with evidence and reasons.

In grades K-5, the standards specify that the goal is for students to state an opinion. Because there is no requirement for students to attend to the norms and conventions of a discipline or maintain an objective tone, students at these grade levels can use the first person when framing their opinion, as in “I think *Charlotte’s Web* shows the importance of friendship.”

In middle and high school, the standards shift to emphasize fashioning arguments that support claims. In grades 6-12, the claim can either straightforwardly prove a point (e.g. “Lincoln’s views on slavery evolved over the course of his lifetime”); starting in grade 7 it can involve alternative positions or counterclaims (e.g. “Though the evil deeds of Macbeth appear to be initiated by his wife, a closer examination of the play reveals that the three malicious witches ultimately control the tragic actions of the king”). Because the standards insist that students establish and maintain a formal style the claim is typically presented not in the first person but rather as an abstract assertion.

What is common among all three kinds of statements is that students must answer a “how” or “why” question, frame their opinion or claim clearly, and indicate the position they are taking. Ultimately, the opinion or claim must be constructed in such a way as to be provable with evidence and reasons.

GENERATING AN ARGUMENT

While the Common Core does not specify any processes for generating an argument, the Anchor Reading Standards provide implicit advice regarding where and how to look at texts to formulate an opinion or claim and support it with reasons and evidence:

- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development
(**ANCHOR READING STANDARD 2**)
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text
(**ANCHOR READING STANDARD 3**)
- Analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone
(**ANCHOR READING STANDARD 4**)
- Analyze the structure of texts
(**ANCHOR READING STANDARD 5**)
- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text
(**ANCHOR READING STANDARD 6**)
- Evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats
(**ANCHOR READING STANDARD 7**)
- Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text
(**ANCHOR READING STANDARD 8**)
- Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics
(**ANCHOR READING STANDARD 9**)

In asking students to “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it” (**ANCHOR READING STANDARD 1**), the CCSS suggests that the best arguments go beyond rehashing broad generalizations to making and defending specific claims and inferences. A successful argument therefore advances a point of view based upon the evidence contained within the text coupled with reasons to support a logical analysis.