

Focus Correction Areas (FCAs) for Informative Writing Grades 3–5

The Common Core categorizes writing into three types: argument, informative/explanatory, and narrative. This document provides users of the Collins Writing Program with focus correction areas (FCAs) for informative writing in grades 3 to 5. The FCAs listed and described here do not include all writing skills (conventions of language, style, etc.) but instead focus on the critical, specialized skills that students will need to be effective informative/explanatory writers. In addition, it would be impossible to focus on the FCAs listed here and not teach many of the other Common Core State Standards; for example, the skills we list as FCAs also impact Standard 4 (clear writing), Standard 5 (revision), Standard 6 (using technology to produce and publish), Standard 7 (conduct short and sustained research), Standard 8 (gather information), Standard 9 (draw evidence), and Standard 10 (write routinely).

The Core introduces informative/explanatory writing in kindergarten with Anchor Writing Standard 2: “Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose informative/explanatory texts in which they name what they are writing about and supply some information about the topic.” In grade 3, when the tests are introduced, Anchor Writing Standard 2 asks students to “write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.” The Anchor Standard does not change for grades 4 and 5.

Informative Vocabulary: On page 2 is a list of general academic vocabulary words related to informative/explanatory writing. It is not a complete list but is an excellent starting point.

Critical FCAs List: Beginning on page 3 is a list of critical FCAs. In column two, each FCA is described and referenced to the specific standard in the Core. Column three has examples of student-level text that would meet the standard set by each FCA.

Eight-Step Process: On page 6, you’ll find an eight-step process to teach FCAs to mastery. Don’t let the fact that there are eight steps cause undue concern about time. The steps include activities you are doing already and may be done over a period of days or weeks. In addition, the steps use all aspects of the Collins Writing Program, from Type One, accessing and assessing prior knowledge, to Type Five, publishing the best examples for the class to use as models. Because the FCAs listed on pages 3–5 are so critical, the time spent teaching and perfecting them is well worth the investment.

Consistent Terminology: Because the Common Core Standards are for literacy in all subjects, we encourage teachers to use the FCAs as they are presented here so that students have a consistent set of expectations and a common language across subjects and grades. Some teachers might find these FCAs too prescriptive or formulaic, and, for our most sophisticated writers, this criticism may be valid, but for many of our students, these standards and FCAs will be new and will need to be presented as clearly as possible. As students become more capable with informative writing, consider adding qualifiers to make the FCAs more rigorous.

As you consider how specific to make an FCA, remember that the tests for the Core (PARCC and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium) are same day events. Students will not have the benefit of extended time to consider and reconsider their approach and structure. The FCAs provided here will give students specific criteria that is essential for informative writing. Students will be able to show their creativity and style through word choice, sentence structure, selection of details, examples, and text structure.

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Informative Vocabulary: The Core divides vocabulary into two types: domain specific and general academic. Domain-specific words and phrases are “specific to a particular field of study,” and, therefore, are more likely to be taught directly. General academic words and phrases are “vocabulary common to written texts but not commonly a part of speech” (CCSS, Appendix A, p. 42). David Coleman, one of the authors of the Common Core, calls general academic vocabulary “the language of power.” As you introduce students to the Standards, take care to define words that students will need to understand. Here are some general academic terms with brief, student-friendly definitions that students will need to know:

caption	the words printed under a picture or cartoon that explain what it is about
category	the name for a group of things organized according to shared qualities
clause	one part of a complex or compound sentence with its own subject and predicate
clear/clearly	easy to understand; or, to say something in a way that is obvious and not easily mistaken
comprehension	the ability to understand something
concluding statement	a way to finish a piece of writing; it comes at the end of a composition and reminds the reader what the writing is about
connect	provide a link or relationship between information or ideas
convey	to tell or explain clearly so that the reader can understand without confusion
detail	facts or information about something
develop	gradually become more detailed and advanced
domain-specific words	words and phrases that are specific to a particular subject or field of study
examine	to look at carefully and closely; to question
facts	information that is true and correct
formatting	the way you arrange your writing
general observation	carefully looking at or watching something in order to learn something
illustration	labeled drawings or pictures that help explain ideas
introduce	to tell about a topic at the beginning of a piece of writing
linking words	words that connect ideas, sentences, and paragraphs together
logically	showing good sense or reasoning
multimedia	text, pictures, and video that you use to explain something
phrase	a small group of words that form a part of a sentence. A phrase can be on its own or within a sentence.
quotation	a sentence or phrase taken from a book, poem, or play, which is repeated by someone else
text	any written material
topic	the subject being written about
transitional words	words or phrases that show a change from one situation, condition, or event to another

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(Note: For Conventions FCAs, see Check Mate Level P or A)

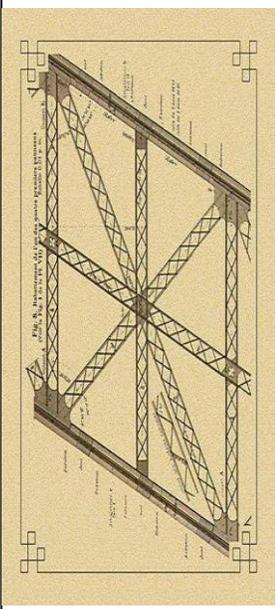
Anchor Standard: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

FCAs for Grade 3	FCAs for Grade 4	FCAs for Grade 5
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce topic 2. <i>n</i> details, facts, definitions 3. Group ideas 4. Labeled illustration 5. Linking words 6. Strong conclusion 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce topic 2. <i>n</i> details, facts, definitions <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>n</i> quotes, examples 3. Paragraphs 4. Labeled illustration, multimedia 5. Linking words 6. Strong conclusion 7. <i>n</i>+ vocabulary 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce topic 2. <i>n</i> details, facts definitions <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>n</i> quotes, examples 3. Paragraphs 4. Labeled illustration, multimedia 5. Linking words 6. Strong conclusion 7. <i>n</i>+ vocabulary

FCAs	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Intro topic 	<p>Student introduces topic so a reader who has not read the prompt will understand what the writing will be about. (W.3,4,5.2a)</p> <p>Tip: A thought provoking question and an unusual example are two techniques a student can practice using.</p>	<p>Can you guess what the most important architectural monument in Europe is? It is the Eiffel Tower, a building with an amazing history.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. <i>n</i> details, facts, defs (grade 3) 	<p>Student uses facts, details, and/or definitions to inform the reader about the topic. (W.3,4,5.2b)</p> <p>Tip: Using a number or a range (e.g., 4-5 facts) gives student writers a sense of how much detail the assignment or prompt will require. The number helps answer their question, "How long?"</p>	<p>The Eiffel Tower was built to last only 20 years. Almost 7 million people visit each year and 250 million have visited since it opened. It has been the site of many scientific experiments including the first radio broadcast in France.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2a. <i>n</i> quotes, examples (grades 4-5) 	<p>In grades 4 and 5, student also uses quotations and examples to inform the reader about the topic. (W.4,5.2b)</p> <p>Tip: Change up the type of detail asked for; e.g., 3 facts, 1 quote, 2 examples.</p>	<p>"Built by Gustave Eiffel for the 1889 Exposition Universelle, its construction in 2 years, 2 months and 5 days was a veritable technical and architectural achievement."</p> <p>The Eiffel Tower at a glance. www.tour-eiffel.fr</p>

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<p>3. Group ideas (grade 3) Paragraphs (grades 4–5)</p>	<p>In grade 3, student groups related information together. In grades 4–5, student logically groups related information in paragraphs and sections. (W.3,4,5.2a.)</p> <p>Tip: As a way of preparing students for writing paragraphs, have them practice grouping two or more related sentences in sections with headings.</p>	<p>The Fastest Horse – The fastest horse is the wild stallion; The First Horses – The first horses were no bigger than a fox; The Most Dangerous Horse – The most dangerous horse is a Percheron.¹</p>
<p>4. Labeled ill. (grade 3) Labeled ill./multimedia (grades 4–5)</p>	<p>When useful to aid comprehension, student uses illustrations (grade 3), formatting (e.g., headings), and multimedia (grades 4–5). (W.3,4,5.2a)</p> <p>Tip: Have students use titles, labels, and/or captions for their illustrations to help readers understand topic.</p>	 <p>Original blueprint of one of the first four panels.</p>
<p>5. Linking words</p>	<p>Student uses linking words, phrases, and clauses to make the relationships between the parts clear and to connect ideas; e.g., <i>also</i>, <i>another</i>, <i>for example</i>, <i>in contrast</i>. (W.3,4,5.2c)</p> <p>Tip: Have students circle the linking words. This practice ensures that students are aware of the links they are using and makes it easier to evaluate.</p>	<p>After the World's Fair was over, the tower was to be torn down but . . . During World War I . . . Over the last 50 years . . . Today, the Eiffel Tower . . .</p>
<p>6. Strong conclusion</p>	<p>Student concludes the paper in sentences, a paragraph, or a section and in a manner that sums up the information in the paper—does not end abruptly. New information is not introduced in the conclusion. (W.3.2d, 4.2e, 5.2e)</p>	<p>When people see the Eiffel Tower today, they think it is a symbol of Paris, but they do not know all the amazing scientific and historical events that make it so special.</p>

¹ Example from the Common Core State Standards Appendix C: Samples of Student Writing, Grade 3, "Horses" pp. 18-21.

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<p>7. <u>n</u>+ vocab # (grades 4–5)</p>	<p>In grades 4 and 5, student uses precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic. (W.4,5.2d)</p> <p>Tip: Providing a specific number (<i>n</i>) or range (3–4) can be helpful. Have students box or circle the vocabulary words and number them in the left margin.</p>	<p>Can you guess what the most important architectural monument in Europe is? The designers also created the iconic Statue of Liberty.</p> <p>1 2,3</p>
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Teaching FCAs for Informative Writing, Grades 3–5

When introducing new FCAs to your students, you may want to consider the following steps, based on a modified version of P. D. Pearson and M. C. Gallagher’s gradual release of responsibility teaching model.

Step One: Select an FCA and ask students to complete a Type One writing assignment. For example, *“We are going to be studying transitions. In at least three written lines, define ‘transition’ and give an example. If you are not sure what to write, give your best guess. You’ll have three minutes.”* This activity will give you an immediate sense of what students know or don’t know and an opportunity to see if there are differing definitions of the terms.

Step Two: After sharing what students think, share your school’s official definition for the FCA and begin to explain any words in the definition that students may not know. Give students examples so they can see exactly what you mean. A great source for examples is Appendix C of the Common Core that gives samples of student writing that meet the standards. Then ask for examples from everyday life to be sure that students have a full understanding of the FCA before they have to apply the skill in a more-rigorous academic situation. For example, you might ask, *“Would ‘Hi, my name is Joe, and I’m going to tell you about a disease I just learned a lot about’ be an effective introduction? If so, why? If not, what would be?”*

Step Three: Give frequent Type Two quizzes that ask students to produce brief written answers to demonstrate that they understand the FCA. For example, after reading an article, you may ask students, *“Write your own three- to five-sentence strong conclusion,”* or *“On a one-to-five scale, rate this article on the author’s use of transitions and explain your rating.”* Many of the standards in the Core may be new to students. Asking them to demonstrate understanding of “details to support” or to rate and explain the author’s use of “organizational structure” will give students a chance to become familiar with the terminology and practice applying the concepts to others’ writing before they have to create new text to meet the standards set by the FCA. It is always easier to judge than to be judged.

Step Four: Have students edit past papers from their writing folders (other students’ and their own) for the FCA. Have students find examples of the FCA or find places where the FCA was missing or in error. Then have students edit directly on their past papers. This step helps make the transfer from knowing to using. For example, if the FCA is clear paragraphing and transitions, ask students to edit past informative papers for paragraphs and transitions.

Step Five: Assign the FCA on an original (Type Three) paper and permit the students to peer edit for the FCA (Type Four). Many students are convinced that they know and can apply a skill only to discover a peer has a different understanding. This practice will give students an opportunity to try out the skill and get feedback before the teacher officially evaluates them. A highly effective variation of peer editing is to ask a student to volunteer to read or show on a document camera the section of the paper that demonstrates the FCA in question, with the promise that if the writing does not meet the standard, the teacher and class will fix it, guaranteeing a good evaluation.

Step Six: Evaluate the class set of papers for the FCAs in question and determine if the class can apply the FCA in an academic setting. In some cases, more instruction will be necessary, but you will have the benefit of authentic student examples to show the class.

Step Seven: Repeat the FCA on new assignments until you feel the students have mastery. One of the advantages of the Core is that it requires the same skill over many years and many subjects; for example, students are asked to introduce a topic from grades 3 to 12. As students progress, some of the skills will become habits, and once the skills are habits, students’ intellectual energies can be directed to producing writing with more sophistication and nuance.

Step Eight: Post or publish some of the best examples of FCAs from student work (Type Five). This practice will give students examples of clearly written position statements, well-explained reasons with support, or strong conclusions. It also provides recognition and motivation for the top performers.

The Collins Writing Program

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The Collins Writing Program strongly recommends the Vocabulary Card assignment in *Improving Student Performance* (pp. 73–76) as a strategy to teach these terms.