

Focus Correction Areas (FCAs) for Narrative 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 narrative 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 narrative 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 narrative writing in kindergarten with Anchor Writing Standard 3: “Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events, tell about the events in the order in which they occurred, and provide a reaction to what happened.” In grade 3, when the tests are introduced, Anchor Writing Standard 3 asks students to “write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.” The Anchor Standard does not change for grades 4 and 5.

Narrative Vocabulary: On page 2 is a list of general academic vocabulary words related to narrative 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 narrative writers, 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 narrative 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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Narrative 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:

character	a person in a story, novel, play, or film
closure	a finish of something; an ending
concrete	something that is definite and specific; not general
descriptive	giving an explanation of what something is like; how things can be seen, heard, or felt in some way
detail	facts or information about something
develop	gradually becoming more detailed and advanced
dialogue	conversation between people in a book, play, or film
establish	to set something up, start; to build in a secure, solid way
event	a happening, especially an important one
event sequence	an order in which events happen or are arranged; continuing and connected series of events
introduce	to tell about an event or experience at the beginning of a story
narrator	the person who is telling the story, usually from their own point of view
organize	to order the ideas in your writing so it is easy for readers to follow and understand
orient	to give knowledge of a new situation; to become familiar with
pacing	the speed at which the story moves along and the way in which the story is revealed
phrase	a small group of words that form a part of a sentence. A phrase can be on its own or within a sentence.
point of view	a position or attitude someone takes on an event or experience
precise	exact; expressed clearly and not in general terms
sensory	relating to the senses of sight, touch, sound, smell, and taste
signal	an word or action that sends a message
situation	what is happening in a particular place at a particular time
temporal	relating to time
transitional words	words or phrases that show a change from one situation, condition, or event to another
unfold	to happen, become clearly understood

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

Focus Correction Areas (FCAs) to Address Narrative Writing, Grades 3–5

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

Anchor Standard: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

FCAs for Grade 3	FCAs for Grade 4	FCAs for Grade 5
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish situation 2. Introduce narrator/characters 3. Sequence events 4. Describe actions, thoughts, feelings 5. Dialogue 6. Time words/phrases 7. Closure 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish situation 2. Introduce narrator/characters 3. Sequence events 4. Describe actions, thoughts, feelings 5. Dialogue 6. Transitional words/phrases 7. Conclusion 8. Sensory details/concrete words 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish situation 2. Introduce narrator/characters 3. Sequence events 4. Describe actions, thoughts, feelings 5. Dialogue <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Pacing 6. Transitional words/phrases/clauses 7. Conclusion 8. Sensory details/concrete words

FCAs

DESCRIPTION

EXAMPLE¹

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish situation 	<p>Student provides a sense of what is happening at a particular time and place. (W.3,4,5.3a)</p> <p>Tip: Have students underline the time and place as a proofreading focus.</p>	<p><i>One night when the air was warm, my puppies were sleeping on the <u>back porch</u>.</i></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Intro narrator/characters 	<p>Student introduces the storyteller and the characters in the story and tells how they relate to one another. (W.3,4,5.3a)</p> <p>Tip: Have students circle the storyteller or number the characters as they are introduced. They may also squiggle underline the words that show how they relate to one another.</p> <p>Student organizes an event sequence that unfolds naturally. (W.3,4,5.3a)</p> <p>Tip: As a proofreading focus, have students number each event.</p>	<p><i>One quiet, Tuesday morning, I woke up to a pair of bright, dazzling shoes, lying right in front of my bedroom door.</i></p> <p><i>I was in bed . . . I read a chapter . . . When I finished I turned out the lamp . . . I wouldn't go to sleep . . . I went into the living room . . .</i></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Sequence events 		

¹All examples from *Common Core State Standards Appendix C: Samples of Student Writing, Grades 3–5*, pp. 22–24, 27–28, and 31–35.

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<p>4. Describe actions, thoughts, feelings</p>	<p>Student describes character’s actions, thoughts, and feelings in detail. (W.3,4,5.3b)</p> <p>Tip: Have students highlight actions in yellow, thoughts in green, and feelings in blue.</p>	<p><i>There was no way out. Grown-ups guarding every entryway, making sure we couldn’t escape. Seeing there was no way out, we gave up and went for it.</i></p>
<p>5. Dialogue</p>	<p>Student uses dialogue to make the characters more life-like and to show their responses to events in the narrative. (W.3,4,5.3b)</p> <p>Tip: Circle the quotation marks at the beginning and end of quotation.</p>	<p><i>After a long while, a nurse said, “Alyssa, Trevor, and Taryn, your turn.”</i></p> <p><i>“It’s a cat attack!” Meisha screamed.</i></p>
<p>5a. Pacing (grade 5)</p>	<p>In grade 5, student uses narrative techniques in addition to dialogue; e.g., description or suspense to develop experiences or events or show characters’ response to situations. (W.5.3b)</p> <p>Tip: Have students work with the technique of foreshadowing to control the pacing of a story.</p>	<p><i>I asked my mom, “So where are the puppies?” Her eyes started to fill with tears as she answered my question with 3 words.</i></p>
<p>6. Time words/phrases (grade 3)</p>	<p>In grade 3, student uses time order words to show the progression of the narrative in time; e.g., <i>I woke up, after lunch, in bed.</i> (W.3.3c)</p> <p>Tip: Have students generate time order words in a Type One writing; post their words for the class to use.</p>	<p><i>After dinner that night, we went looking for Maggie and Tucker.</i></p> <p><i>The next day, I still worried.</i></p>
<p>6. Transitional words/phrases/ clauses (grades 4–5)</p>	<p>In grades 4 and 5, student uses transitional words, phrases, and clauses to manage the sequence of time. (W.4,5.3c)</p> <p>Tip: Post transitional words, phrases, and clauses for students to use, e.g., <i>after, before, next, once, until now, when.</i> Give a number or range (e.g., 4-6) to make the expectation clear.</p>	<p><i>When I started out the door . . . As I walked on . . . When I reached the school building . . .</i></p>

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<p>7. Closure (grade 3)</p>	<p>In grade 3, student provides an ending to the story that gives a sense of closure to the events. (W.3.3d)</p>	<p><i>I've got over them leaving because Mom says we can get 2 new puppies very soon.</i></p>
<p>7. Conclusion (grades 4–5)</p>	<p>In grades 4 and 5, student provides a conclusion that follows from the narrated events or experience. Characters resolve conflict or learn from the experience. No new elements are introduced at the end. (W.4.5.3e)</p>	<p><i>We opened the door and the sparkling sun blinded our eyes. It was over. All over. Finally.</i></p>
<p>8. Sensory details/concrete words (grades 4–5)</p>	<p>In grades 4 and 5, student uses sensory details and concrete words to create a precise sense of place and time and to make characters unique. (W.4.5.3d) Tip: Have students generate sensory details in a Type One writing; post their words for the class to use. Do the same with examples of concrete words.</p>	<p><i>My shoes were a nice shade of violet and smelled like catnip.</i> <i>We were in the darkness filled, mountain-top cold waiting room.</i></p>

Teaching FCAs for Narrative Writing, 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 ‘sensory details’ and ‘concrete vocabulary’ in narrative writing. In at least four written lines, define ‘sensory details’ and ‘concrete vocabulary’ and give examples of vocabulary that is sensory and concrete. 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-created assignments 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, “*Here is a description from yesterday’s newspaper describing _____ . Would you consider it sensory and concrete? Give two to three specific examples to support your opinion.*”

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 a short story, you may ask students, “*On a one-to-five scale, rate the introduction to the short story on whether or not it ‘established the situation.’ Give two examples to support your rating.*” Many of the standards in the Core may be new to students. Asking them to demonstrate understanding of “establishing the situation” 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 “sensory details,” ask students to edit past narrative papers for “sensory details.”

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 use dialogue and establish a situation 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 transitions, effective use of dialogue, and strong conclusion. It also provides recognition and motivation for the top performers.