

Focus Correction Areas (FCAs) for Argument Writing Grades 6–8

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 argument writing in grades 6 to 8. 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 argument 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 source-based argument writing for the first time in the grade 6 Standards. From grade 6 on, students must support their claims with reasons and provide evidence from credible sources. Unlike persuasive or opinion writing, which can be based on emotion or personal appeal, argument writing is evidence based; that is, students must use sources (written text, video, charts, graphs, etc.) as evidence to support their reasons.

Argument Vocabulary: On page 2 is a list of general academic vocabulary words related to argument 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 already doing 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 argument 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 argument writing. Students will be able to show their creativity and style through word choice, sentence structure, selection of reasons, examples, and analysis.

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Argument 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.” Others call it the language of college or the language of opportunity. 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:

analyze	to consider more than one opinion on a topic or question before drawing your own conclusions <i>or</i> to consider a topic or question carefully by breaking your response to it into parts
argument	a way to convince another person of your opinion by using evidence from a text or another relevant source
audience	the person or group of people, in addition to your classmates and teacher, who may read your writing
citation	a passage or phrase from a book or other piece of writing
cite	if you cite something, you quote it or mention it, especially as an example or proof of what you are saying
claim	an idea you believe to be true that you can support with evidence
cohesion	the order of your ideas and how you link them together
counterclaim	the response given by someone who doesn’t agree with your claim
credible	believable, trustworthy; based on data or experience
e.g.	a Latin abbreviation meaning “for example”
evidence	the relevant and concrete information and examples you give to prove your point and support your reasons
formal style	written in a serious voice that avoids casual phrasing, slang, and contractions but can include <i>I</i>
knowledgeable	a clear understanding of a particular topic; having had extensive experience with the topic
objective tone	a reasonable voice that relies on evidence, not emotions, to develop an argument
plagiarize	to copy someone else’s words or ideas without giving credit
precise	expressed exactly and in a way that distinguishes your idea from others
reason	a statement that explains why the reader should believe your claim
relevant	closely relates to and supports the point you are making
source	the book, magazine, or internet reference in which the story, argument, or piece of research you are summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting first appeared
substantive	important, serious; not silly or extreme
transition	a word or phrase that helps the writer change from one idea to another

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 Argument Writing, Grades 6–8

(Note: For Conventions FCAs, see *Check Mate* Level B)

Anchor Standard: Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

FCAs for Grade 6	FCAs for Grade 7	FCAs for Grade 8
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Claim/2–3 reasons/1 2. Cite <i>n</i>+ credible sources 3. <i>n</i>+ Reasons/textual evidence explained 4. Paragraph/transitions 5. <i>n</i>+ Content-specific vocabulary 6. Formal style 7. Strong conclusion 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Counterclaim/claim/2–3 reasons/1 2. Cite <i>n</i>+ credible sources 3. <i>n</i>+ Reasons/textual evidence explained 4. Paragraph/transitions 5. <i>n</i>+ Content-specific vocabulary 6. Formal style 7. Strong conclusion 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Counterclaim/claim/2–3 reasons/1 2. Cite <i>n</i>+ credible sources 3. <i>n</i>+ Reasons/textual evidence explained 4. Paragraph/transitions 5. <i>n</i>+ Content-specific vocabulary 6. Formal style 7. Strong conclusion

FCAS

DESCRIPTION

EXAMPLE

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. C/2–3Rs/1 <p>Claim/2–3 reasons/1 (grade 6)</p>	<p>In grade 6, student provides a succinct, one-sentence statement of the claim about the question with briefly stated reasons and without using the pronoun <i>I</i>. (W.6.1a)</p> <p>Tip: Have students underline the claim statement.</p>	<p><i>Spring Middle School should not adopt the proposed dress code for historical, aesthetic, and scientific reasons.</i></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CC/C/2–3Rs/1 <p>Counterclaim/claim/2–3 reasons/1 (grades 7–8)</p>	<p>In grades 7 and 8, student provides a one-sentence statement that acknowledges a counterclaim (e.g., with an <i>Although</i> . . . clause), states the claim clearly without using the pronoun <i>I</i>, and gives general reasons without details. (W.7,8.1a)</p> <p>Tip: Have students underline the claim sentence and circle the counterclaim.</p>	<p><i>Although many parents love the idea of a dress code, Spring High School should not adopt one for historical, aesthetic, and scientific reasons.</i></p> <p><i>Instead of solving problems, cameras would cause the problems.^{1*}</i></p>

¹Examples marked with an * are from *Common Core State Standards Appendix C: Samples of Student Writing, Grade 7, “Video Cameras in Classrooms”* pp. 40–41.

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<p>2. Cite <i>n</i> + credible sources</p>	<p>Student cites information from a minimum number of source materials and may comment on credibility of the information. (W.6,7,8.1b)</p> <p>Tip: In the left margin, have students number the sources cited.</p>	<p>"A 2005 study, on the other hand, indicates that in some Ohio high schools uniforms may have improved graduation and attendance rates, although no improvements were observed in academic performance." Marian Wilde, "Do uniforms make schools better?" greatschools.org</p>
<p>3. <i>n</i> + Reasons/textual evidence explained</p>	<p>Student supports reasons mentioned in the claim with specific evidence from source materials and explains how the evidence supports the reasons. (W.6,7,8.1b)</p> <p>Tip: The principle difference between opinion writing in the lower grades and argument writing in grades 6–12 is that argument is source based.</p> <p>Tip: In the left margin, have students number their source-based reasons.</p>	<p>Our school wants to adopt uniforms to improve our skills, but there is no evidence to support that uniforms have any effect on how much students learn.</p> <p>... we already have cameras in the halls ... Our school district already has a low budget ...*</p>
<p>4. Paragraph/transitions ¶/trans</p>	<p>Student organizes the reasons and evidence logically. (W.6,7,8.1a.)</p> <p>Students use words, phrases, and clauses to clarify the relationships among claims, reasons (grade 6), evidence (grade 7), and counterclaims (grade 8). (W.6,7,8.1c)</p> <p>Tip: Paragraphs provide readers with clear visual signs of where the central reasons begin and end.</p> <p>Tip: Provide students with examples of transitions, e.g., <i>again, also, as a result, as a rule, as well as, consequently, especially, for instance, for this reason, instead, still, yet.</i></p>	<p>Clear paragraph break: Students need the opportunity to express themselves. For example ... Another example ... Finally ...</p> <p>If ... already ... why ... so ... Some students ... Other students ... These students ... All of these different students ...*</p>

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<p>5. n + Content-specific vocab</p>	<p>Students demonstrate an understanding of the text by using the vocabulary of the text or topic. (W.6,7,8.1b)</p> <p>Tip: Using a number (n+) or a range (e.g., 5-7) gives student writers a sense of how much is enough. Have students highlight or number the content-specific words.</p>	<p>cameras, students, classrooms, video, teachers, money, lens, distraction*</p>
<p>6. Formal style</p>	<p>Student avoids slang, text messaging abbreviations, and casual dialogue. Student uses general academic vocabulary rather than everyday speech. (W.6,7,8.1d)</p> <p>Tip: In addition to having students use general academic vocabulary, have them use transition words or phrases and also have them write without using contractions.</p>	<p>Don't write <i>My mom and pop have no style. No way they can tell me how to dress. I would look a fool.</i> Rather, write <i>My parents' style does not reflect current trends. I would look out of place and be self-conscious.</i></p> <p><i>But when a teacher goes out of the classroom, what usually happens is either everything goes on as usual, or the students get a little more talkative. . . . Different students react differently when there is a camera in the room.*</i></p>
<p>7. Strong conclusion</p>	<p>Student briefly and clearly sums up the claim and reasons using different words; that is, not an exact repeat of original claim. Strong conclusions can also include a challenge, request for support, or a call to action. (W.6,7,8.1e)</p> <p>Tip: Encourage students to limit conclusion to approximately 10% of the paper to discourage a "Let me tell you what I told you" conclusion and promote a concise, powerful ending.</p> <p>Tip: Consider the "If ..., then ..." ending.</p>	<p><i>The proposed dress code, while well intended, runs contrary to our school mission and history, suppresses creativity and free expression, and has no data to prove it would solve the problems it was designed to solve. Speak up against the dress code!</i></p> <p><i>Instead of solving problems, cameras would cause the problems. That is why I disagree with the idea to put cameras in classrooms. This plan should not be put to action.*</i></p> <p>If the proposed dress code is adopted, then students freedom of expression will be suppressed, and a whole new set of problems may be created.</p>

Teaching FCAs for Argument Writing, 6–8

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 claims and counterclaims. In at least four written lines, define a 'claim' and a 'counterclaim' and give an example of each. 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 a parent's review of their child's performance in a play be an example of a 'credible source'? 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 formal style and explain your rating."* Many of the standards in the Core may be new to students. Asking them to demonstrate understanding of "credible source" or to rate and explain the author's use of "paragraphs and transitions" 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 effective paragraphing and transitions, ask students to edit past argument 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 state a claim and provide a concluding statement from grades 6 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.