

Focus Correction Areas (FCAs) for Informative 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 informative 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 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 writing from the earliest grades, asking students in grade 3 to “write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.” The anchor standard for informative/explanatory writing in grades 6 to 8 requires students to “examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.” The Core is not changing the basic skills of informative writing but asking students to write about more complex topics at a deeper level.

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.” Here are some general academic terms with brief, student-friendly definitions that you 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
category	the name for a group of things organized according to shared qualities
cause/effect	a way to organize writing that explains what made something happen (its cause) and what the results were (its effect)
classification	to arrange by similar qualities
cohesion	the order of your ideas and how you link them together to form a unified whole
comparison/contrast	a way to organize writing that shows how things are alike (comparison) and how they are different (contrast)
concept	an idea, usually something you cannot touch or see
concrete details	specific, particular points, features, or parts
content	the ideas or subject that your writing expresses
convey	to tell or explain clearly so that the reader can understand without confusion
domain-specific vocabulary	words that are used in a subject that are usually not used in other subjects
formal style	written in a serious voice that avoids casual phrasing, slang, and contractions but can include <i>I</i>
graphics	a drawing, usually made up of lines
heading/subheading	a short statement, usually in a different typeface, that describes what a section of text is about
logical	each idea that follows is connected to the one before so that it makes sense
multimedia	use of several types of media such as text, pictures, video, and sound
organization	in writing, the order of ideas and information
paraphrase	to express what is said or written using your own words and in about the same number of words as the original speech or piece of writing
plagiarize	to use or copy another person’s idea or work and present it as your own
preview	to show what is coming, to tell a reader how a piece of writing will be organized
quote	to include the exact words of another writer or speaker in your own writing to support a particular point or claim while attributing the author
quotation	a phrase, line, or paragraph put in quotation marks that you include, word-for-word, in your own writing while attributing the author
relevant	closely relates to and supports the point you are making
slang	words or expressions that are not formal, “street language” not “school language”
source	the book, magazine, or article in which the story, argument, or piece of research you are summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting first appeared
subtitle	the second title, usually under the main title, that is often longer and explain the title
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 Informative Writing, Grades 6–8

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

Anchor Standard: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

FCAs for Grade 6	FCAs for Grade 7	FCAs for Grade 8
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce topic 2. Clear organization 3. Format 4. Labeled graphic 5. Develop with <i>n</i> facts, details, definitions, quotes 6. Paragraph/transitions 7. <i>n</i> vocabulary # 8. Formal style 9. Strong conclusion 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce topic/preview 2. Clear organization 3. Format 4. Labeled graphic 5. Develop with <i>n</i> facts, details, definitions, quotes 6. Transitions that unify/clarify 7. <i>n</i> vocabulary # 8. Formal style 9. Strong conclusion 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce topic/preview 2. Clear organization 3. Format 4. Labeled graphic 5. Develop with <i>n</i> facts, details, definitions, quotes 6. Transitions that unify/clarify 7. <i>n</i> vocabulary # 8. Formal style 9. Strong conclusion

FCAs	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Intro topic (grade 6) 	<p>In grade 6, student introduces topic so a reader who has not read the prompt will understand what the writing will be about. (W.6,7,8.2a)</p> <p>Tip: Have students use a thought provoking question or an unusual example as a specific introductory technique.</p>	<p><i>Did you ever wonder why so many menus have gluten free items? These items appeal to customers who have celiac disease.</i></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Intro topic/preview (grades 7–8) 	<p>In grades 7 and 8, student introduces topic and tells reader how the writing is organized and what is to follow. (W.7,8.2a)</p> <p>Tip: In preview, student tells the reader the organization being used. Encourage students not to use “I” in their introduction.</p>	<p><i>Did you ever wonder why so many menus have gluten free items? These items appeal to customers who have celiac disease. Because this disease is so widespread, we should all know about its symptoms and treatment.</i></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Clear org. 	<p>Student clearly organizes the information using definition, classification, cause/effect, and comparison/contrast. (W.6,7,8.2a)</p> <p>Tip: In the left margin, have students identify the technique they used.</p>	<p><i>Celiac disease is defined by the Mayo Clinic as “an immune reaction to eating gluten.” An immune reaction is . . . Gluten is a protein found . . .</i> (organization by definition)</p>

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<p>3. Format</p>	<p>When appropriate, student uses titles, accurate subtitles, headings, subheadings, graphics, and multimedia to help the reader comprehend topic. (W.6,7,8.2a)</p> <p>Tip: Each of these elements could be an FCA on different assignments, or students could choose from among them.</p>	<p>Symptoms: Common symptoms of celiac disease include . . .</p> <p>Treatment: A gluten free diet . . .</p>
<p>4. Labeled graphic</p>	<p>When appropriate, student uses graphics (charts, tables) or multimedia to help readers understand topic. (W.6,7,8.2a)</p> <p>Tip: Have students add titles, labels, or captions to their graphics.</p>	<p>Student provides a labeled drawing of the digestive system with focus on the small intestine.</p>
<p>5. Dev n facts, details, def, quotes</p>	<p>Student uses facts, details, definitions, or quotes to inform the reader about the topic. (W.6,7,8.2b)</p> <p>Tip: Using a number (<i>n</i>) or a range (e.g., 6–8 facts) gives student writers a sense of how much detail the assignment or prompt will require. The number helps answer their question, “How many?”</p>	<p>Celiac disease is named after the section of the body called the celiac or the abdominal cavity. Symptoms can begin at any time of life. People with celiac disease cannot take nutrients into the body and become undernourished no matter how much they eat.</p>
<p>6. Paragraph/transitions ¶/trans</p>	<p>Student uses clear paragraph breaks and transitions to make the relationships between paragraphs clear, e.g., <i>another</i>, <i>for example</i>, <i>also</i>, <i>in addition</i>. (W.6,7,8.2c)</p> <p>Tip: Have students circle or box the transitions. This practice makes it easier to evaluate and ensures that students are aware of the transitions they are using.</p>	<p>Clear paragraph breaks: Another symptom is . . . A second test that could help diagnose . . .</p>
<p>7. n vocab #</p>	<p>Student correctly uses precise language and domain-specific vocabulary (i.e., technical words related to the subject) to inform about or explain the topic. (W.6,7,8.2d)</p> <p>Tip: Providing a specific number (<i>n</i>) or range (4–6) can be helpful. Vocabulary words are circled or boxed and numbered in the left margin.</p>	<p>1 Celiac disease is hard to diagnose because 2 the symptoms vary from person to person. In addition, researchers believe that there are multiple causes, from severe stress to 3 viral infection.</p>

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<p>8. Formal style</p>	<p>Student uses a formal style rather than everyday speech. (W.6,7,8.2e)</p> <p>Tip: Provide students with specific academic vocabulary words from which to choose, or have students generate a list through a Type One writing and class sharing.</p> <p>Tip: Student avoids slang, text messaging abbreviations, and casual dialogue.</p>	<p>Don't write "Some of the symptoms are really, really gross," or "You can't even wolf down a pizza if you have this problem." Rather, write "People afflicted with this disease will not be able to enjoy some of the simple pleasures: good bread and hot pizza."</p>
<p>9. Strong conclusion</p>	<p>Student concludes the paper in a manner that sums up and supports the information or explanation presented in the body of the paper. (W.6,7,8.2f)</p> <p>Tip: New information is not introduced in the conclusion.</p>	<p>Finally, be aware that you may become a victim of this disabling disease. It can appear at any time of life and seems to becoming more prevalent.</p>

The Collins Writing Program
Teaching FCAs for Informative 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 conclusions. In at least four written lines, define ‘strong conclusion’ 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 domain specific vocabulary and explain your rating.”* Many of the standards in the Core may be new to students. Asking them to demonstrate understanding of “formal style” 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.