

Focus Correction Areas (FCAs) for Informative Writing Grades 9–12

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 9 to 12. 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.” In grades 9 to 12, the anchor standard changes focus from “ideas” to “complex ideas,” from “clearly” to “clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.” The Core is not changing the skills, but is changing the context of the skill application, asking students to write about more complex topics with greater nuance, more sophisticated details, and advanced diction.

Informative Vocabulary: Beginning 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: See pages 4–6 for 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 7, 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 4–6 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.” 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:

accurate	correct to a very detailed level
analogy	a story or situation similar to another that helps the reader understand
audience	the group of people that will likely read your writing
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
central idea	the chief point or main idea (expressed in a sentence or two, not just a few words) that an author is making about a topic
close reading	the careful reading of a text to understand the central ideas and to analyze how the author uses words, details, and organization to make an impact
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)
complex ideas	ideas with many different or related parts and, therefore, often difficult to understand
connection	linking ideas together and showing the reader how they are related
convention	a traditional method or style; a standard custom
discipline	a field of study
distinctions	a clear difference between similar things
gist	the general meaning of a piece of writing, usually expressed in a sentence or two (similar to central idea)
implications	likely to happen as a result of; consequences
metaphor	a figure of speech suggesting a similarity between two unrelated things; an imaginative comparison without using <i>like</i> or <i>as</i>
norm	official level of achievement or standard of behavior expected
objective tone	a voice that relies on reason rather than emotion to persuade the reader
organizational structure	how a text is organized; using design features to clearly present 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
purpose	the reason an author decides to write about a specific topic. Once a topic is selected, the author must decide whether his purpose for writing is to inform, argue, tell a story, or some combination of these.

Focus Correction Areas (FCAs) for Informative Writing Grades 9–12

quotation	a phrase, line, or paragraph put in quotation marks that you include, word-for-word, in your own writing while attributing the author
significant	not trivial; important or crucial
simile	a comparison using <i>like</i> or <i>as</i>
source	the book, magazine, or internet reference in which the story, argument, or piece of research you are summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting first appeared
subtitle	a second title, often longer and more detailed than the first title
summary	a brief statement of the central ideas of a speech, event, process, or piece of writing
supporting details	the facts, statements, and examples that give us a full understanding of the central idea. Supporting details answer the six basic research questions of who, what, where, when, why, and how.
syntax	the way that words are put together in order to make a sentence; the order and relationship of phrases in a sentence
text structure	how a text is organized and if it has any graphics, headings, or illustrations that make it easier to understand
topic	what the text is about, usually expressed in a word or phrase
topic sentence	the sentence in a paragraph that contains the central idea of that paragraph

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 9–12

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

Anchor Standard: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

FCAs for Grades 9–10	FCAs for Grades 11–12
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce topic/preview structure 2. Format 3. Labeled graphic 4. Develop with <i>n</i> facts, details, definitions, quotes 5. Paragraph/transitions 6. <i>n</i> vocabulary # 7. Formal style 8. Objective tone 9. Strong conclusion 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce topic/preview structure 2. Format 3. Labeled graphic 4. Develop with <i>n</i> facts, details, definitions, quotes 5. Paragraph/transitions 6. <i>n</i> vocabulary # <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Metaphor, simile, or analogy 7. Formal style 8. Objective tone 9. Strong conclusion

FCAs	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Intro topic/preview structure 	<p>Student introduces topic so a reader who has not read the prompt will understand what the writing will be about. In preview, student informs reader how the writing is organized and what is to follow. (W.9–10,11–12.2a)</p> <p>Tip: Have students use an anecdote or a rhetorical question 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. Because this disease is so widespread, we should all know about its symptoms and treatment.</i></p> <p><i>It was when I was 14 years old that I first learned an important lesson about the impact on my body of the gluten in the foods I was eating.</i></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Format 	<p>When useful, student uses titles, accurate subtitles, headings, subheadings, graphics and multimedia to help the reader comprehend topic. (W.9–10,11–12.2a)</p> <p>Tip: Each of these elements could be an FCA on different assignments, or students could choose from among the elements.</p>	<p>Symptoms: Common symptoms of celiac disease include . . .</p> <p>Treatment: A gluten free diet . . .</p>

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<p>3. Labeled graphic</p>	<p>When useful, student uses graphics or multimedia with titles, labels, and captions to help readers understand topic. (W.9–10,11–12.2a)</p> <p>Tip: Each of these elements could be an FCA on different assignments. Students should move to self-select which element is most appropriate for the paper they are writing.</p>	<p>Student provides a labeled drawing of the digestive system with focus on the small intestine.</p>
<p>4. Dev n facts, details, def, quotes</p>	<p>Student uses facts, details, definitions, and/or quotes to inform the reader about the topic. (W.9–10,11–12.2b)</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 long?”</p> <p>Student uses clear paragraph breaks and transitions to make the relationships between paragraphs clear (<i>another, for example, also, in addition</i>). (W.9–10,11–12.2c)</p>	<p><i>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.</i></p>
<p>5. Paragraph/transitions ¶/trans</p>	<p>Tip: Have students circle the transitions. This practice makes it easier to evaluate and ensures that students are aware of the transitions they are using.</p> <p>Student correctly uses precise language and domain specific vocabulary (i.e., technical words related to the subject) to manage the complexity of the topic. (W.9–10,11–12.2d)</p> <p>Tip: Using a number (<i>n</i>) or a range (e.g., 6–8 words) is a helpful guide for students.</p> <p>Tip: Have students circle or box the words and number them in the left margin.</p>	<p>Clear paragraph breaks: <i>Another symptom is . . . A second test that could help diagnose . . .</i></p>
<p>6. n vocab #</p>	<p>1 Celiac disease is hard to diagnose because</p> <p>2 the symptoms vary from person to person.</p> <p>3 In addition, researchers believe that there are multiple causes, from severe stress to viral infection.</p>	<p>1 Celiac disease is hard to diagnose because</p> <p>2 the symptoms vary from person to person.</p> <p>3 In addition, researchers believe that there are multiple causes, from severe stress to viral infection.</p>

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<p>6a. Metaphor, simile, or analogy (grades 11–12)</p>	<p>In grades 11 and 12, student uses figurative language to help reader understand topic. (W.11–12.d)</p> <p>Tip: In left margin, have students identify the technique they used.</p>	<p><i>Even when people think they are eating a proper diet, celiac disease, like a stealthy thief, takes critical nutrients from the body by . . .</i></p>
<p>7. Formal style</p>	<p>Student avoids slang, text messaging abbreviations, and casual dialogue. Student uses general academic vocabulary rather than everyday speech. (W.9–10,11–12.2e)</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>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>8. Objective tone</p>	<p>Student informs the reader without being too personal or conversational. They are aware that they are writing to a general audience who is, at least, somewhat interested in the topic. (W.9–10,11–12.2e)</p> <p>Tip: Have students use compare/contrast or cause/effect statements to convey an objective tone.</p>	<p><i>I know people who have had this disease and by watching their diet, most get better quickly, but it takes real will power and help from friends.</i></p> <p><i>Unlike people without celiac disease, those with the disease must watch their diets carefully in order to stay healthy.</i></p>
<p>9. Strong conclusion</p>	<p>Student briefly and clearly sums up and supports the information presented in the body of the paper and does not add new information. If appropriate, student comments on the significance of topic or implication for the future. (W.9–10,11–12.2f)</p>	<p><i>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.</i></p>

Teaching FCAs for Informative Writing, 9–12

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 objective tone. In at least four written lines, define 'objective tone' and give an example of text written in an objective tone and text that is not objective. If you are not sure what to write, give your best guess. You'll have six to eight 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 formal style and explain your rating."* Many of the standards in the Core may be new to students. Asking them to demonstrate understanding of "analogy" 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 paper (Type Three) 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 provide a concluding statement from grades 4 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.