

Focus Correction Areas (FCAs) for Narrative 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 narrative 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 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.” By grade 6 students are expected to “write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.” Although the Anchor Standard does not change past grade 6, narrative writing in grades 9–12 is expected to develop in a deeper, more sophisticated manner with vivid descriptives.

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:

capture	to hold the attention of the reader
coherent	clear, logical; well planned so that all parts go together well
connection	linking events together, showing the reader how they are related
convey	to tell or explain clearly so that the reader can understand without confusion
mood	how the reader feels as a result of reading the narrative
mystery	a puzzling problem with no obvious solution; a story in which strange things happen that are not explained until the end
outcome	the effect, result, or consequence
plot	the causes and logical structure which connect the events of a story
plot line	an event that centers around one or more groups of characters
point of view	in narrative writing, the position of the narrator in a story: first-person, second-person, or third-person
reflection	in narrative writing, when a character describes learning resulting from the events or actions
resolution	a solution to a problem, or result of an action
sensory language	words relating to the senses of sight, touch, sound, smell, and taste
setting	the particular place and time where an event occurs
significance	the importance or meaning of something
smooth progression	gradual development of a series of related events
subplot	plot which is less important than and separate from the main plot but usually linked to the main plot
suspense	tension experienced by the reader due to an uncertain outcome of events in the narrative
technique	a particular method of doing an activity; usually involves skills that are developed through training and practice
telling details	details that reveal the true nature of a person or situation; details that have a strong impact
theme	the central idea, subject, or meaning of a literary work
tone	the attitude an author has toward the subject. The tone of a narrative could be formal or informal, playful, ironic, optimistic or pessimistic, etc.
vivid	easy to see or imagine; intense, clear, or detailed
well-chosen	carefully selected

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 9–12

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

Anchor Standard: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

FCAs for Grade 9–10	FCAs for Grade 11–12
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engaging situation & setting <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Establish <i>n</i>+ points of view 2. Introduce narrator/characters 3. Dialogue/pacing 4. Multiple plot lines 5. Purposeful sequence of events <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Shift time frame or setting 6. Vivid/precise words 7. Reflective conclusion 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engaging situation & setting <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Establish <i>n</i>+ points of view b. Significance of situation 2. Introduce narrator/characters 3. Dialogue/pacing 4. Multiple plot lines 5. Purposeful sequence of events <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Shift time frame or setting b. Build tone/outcome 6. Vivid/precise words 7. Reflective conclusion

FCAS

DESCRIPTION

EXAMPLE¹

FCAS	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE ¹
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Engaging situation & setting 	<p>Student creates a clear sense of a problem or situation, including time and place, in a manner that captures the readers’ curiosity or interest. (W.9-10,11-12.3a)</p> <p>Tip: Have students use a shocking statement, an anecdote, or a quotation to engage the reader.</p>	<p><i>I was four years old when our house was destroyed.</i></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1a. Establish <i>n</i>+ points of view 	<p>Student creates one or more points of view that help relay the events of the narrative and portray the feelings or motives of the characters. (W.9-10,11-12.3a)</p> <p>Tip: As a proofreading focus, have students circle the words that indicate in which person the story is being told; e.g., <i>he, I, they</i>.</p> <p>Tip: Have students indicate in the margin when the point of view shifts (if it does).</p>	<p><i>I didn’t understand why but I could remember when the big red tractor came belching its smoke, gleaming in the hot midday sunshine, and rolling over the landscape plowing long furrows in perfect unison.</i></p>

¹ Examples of student work have been taken from essays compiled on achievethecore.org, an excellent resource for samples of student writing.

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<p>1b. Significance of situation (grades 11–12)</p>	<p>In grades 11–12, student reveals the importance of the situation or problem that is the main focus of the narrative, using insight or a fresh perspective. (W.11-12.3a) Tip: As a proofreading focus, have students underline their words of insight or fresh perspective.</p>	<p>Years later they told me it was the bank – the monster that lived and breathed profits from the land.</p>
<p>2. Intro narrator/characters</p>	<p>Student introduces the storyteller and the characters in the story through an organized and logical event sequence. (W.9-10,11-12.3a)</p>	<p>I was still in the womb when the drought came with its monstrous black clouds of dust that enveloped the landscape.</p>
<p>3. Dialogue/pacing</p>	<p>Student uses techniques, such as dialogue, description, and reflection, to make the characters more life-like and to improve the pacing of the narrative. (W.9-10,11-12.3b) Tip: More detail tends to slow the pace of a story; summarizing an action moves it along more quickly.</p>	<p>Pa told me that the bank was cultivating the land because we could no longer sustain the profit ourselves.</p>
<p>4. Multiple plot lines</p>	<p>Student develops multiple plot lines that center around a group of characters and establishes a coherent connection between the plot lines. (W.9-10,11-12.3b) Tip: As a proofreading focus, have students indicate in the margin when a plot line begins.</p>	<p>That was my home, the house where I was born, the house where I learned to walk, and the house my father had built with his own craftsmanship so quickly destroyed returning to the dust from which it came.</p>
<p>5. Purposeful sequence of events</p>	<p>Student provides a smooth progression and gradual development of related events so the reader can easily follow the narrative. Student uses transitions to manage the sequence of events that build toward a conclusion. (W.9-10,11-12.3c) TIP: Provide students with a list of temporal transition words to use, e.g., <i>after, after that, and then, at this point, at this time, before, by, concurrently, during, finally, first of all, followed by, formerly, immediately, meanwhile, next, previously, soon, subsequently, thereafter.</i></p>	<p>Pa stepped away from the tractor . . . Slowly, the machine approached the house as if it were not even there . . . the wall and roof caved in in five minutes, the tractor was able to reduce Pa to nothing.</p>

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<p>5a. Shift time frame or setting</p>	<p>Student moves characters from one place to another or from one time to another without confusing the reader. (W.9-10,11-12.3c)</p>	<p><i>I'll never forget the day the bank took our house.</i></p> <p><i>Back then, I was merely a child watching and wondering what his father would do next.</i></p>
<p>5b. Build tone/outcome (grades 11–12)</p>	<p>In grades 11–12, student creates a particular tone (playful, formal or informal, fantasy, mystery, etc.) and builds toward an outcome that reflects the tone. (W.11-12.3c)</p> <p>Tip: The tone reflects the writer's attitude about the subject of the writing. Ask students to indicate, in the left margin, the attitude they show in their first paragraph. It sets the tone for the story.</p>	<p><i>I did not know nor cared what it meant. I was just a kid playing Indians and Cowboys with my two brothers and sister the day the tractor came.</i></p>
<p>6. Vivid/precise words</p>	<p>Student uses vivid words and descriptive sensory details that match the tone and help the reader imagine a clear, unique picture or capture the action. (W.9-10,11-12.3d)</p> <p>Tip: As a proofreading focus, have students underline the vivid words and descriptive sensory details they used to match the tone of the first paragraph.</p>	<p><i>When the profit ceased, the bank found other means to satisfy its never-ending appetite for the financial food known to farmers as profit.</i></p>
<p>7. Reflective conclusion</p>	<p>Student reveals what characters have learned from the experience or has characters reflect on the result of an action or the solution to a problem from within the narrative. (W.9-10,11-12.3e)</p> <p>Tip: Have students underline the learning or reflection in the conclusion.</p>	<p><i>But what do I care; I was merely a child in a large, dusty, lonely world.</i></p>

Teaching FCAs for Narrative Writing, Grades 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 'vivid and precise vocabulary' in narrative writing. In at least four written lines, define 'vivid and precise vocabulary' and give examples of vocabulary this is and is not vivid and precise. 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. 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 vivid and precise? 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 had an 'engaging situation or setting.' 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 "engaging situation or setting" 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 "reflective conclusion," ask students to edit past narrative papers for "reflective conclusions."

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 conclusions. It also provides recognition and motivation for the top performers.