

## Still struggling? A Writing Teacher's Cheat Sheet

### Timing:

- Have students write within the time frame of the assessment. Take up papers when time is up, mirroring the testing time as much as possible. If you must break up the time because of class length, try to do it without interrupting the drafting stage.
- Make sure students can write within the time frames for **both** the direct prompt (30 or 40 minutes) and the passage-based prompt (90 minutes). As you model timing for each time frame, share strategies that would be appropriate for each (e.g., more time for planning and drafting a longer piece, revising with ARMS, actually having time for editing)
- Break down the time into manageable chunks. As you model, show how to analyze (WWW) and choose a prompt quickly, how to prewrite or plan in five minutes, etc. Gradually release students from your guidance so they will be able to gauge their time independently.
- Hold students accountable for that time, especially during the direct prompt. Practice doing lots of brainstorming and planning so that students can get their thinking done quickly and efficiently.
- Model for them the importance of not taking too long on any one part of the piece. If they get stuck on how to introduce the piece, for example, have them leave a blank space for the lead, write their point or thesis, and go ahead and write the planned body. They can always come back later when they have an idea of what to say in those introductory sentences. If they should run out of time and not be able to complete their intros, they would at least have the focus and the body of the piece written.

### Deciding on a prompt

- Model how to choose between two prompts, using WWW to help students decide which topic/ audience/ purpose they know most about.
- Always use two prompts in an On-Demand Direct Prompt scrimmage or check, especially when the entire piece is to be written and timed (as opposed to just a planning activity)
- Make sure every prompt offers the writer a choice of either the side he'd pick to support or the item he is to explain. This is especially true in argument/ opinion prompts. Students should be taught to decide quickly which side they support, based on the evidence they can produce either from the given Writing Situation, the provided text, or their own internal research.
- Build choices within prompts so that writers can make the best decision for themselves about which prompt to choose. This is especially true in argument/ opinion prompts. They should be taught to decide quickly which side they support, based on the evidence they can produce either from the given Writing Situation or their own internal research.
- Provide a variety of modes within the choices so that everything is not a letter. Many students choose a prompt merely because of the mode, not because of how much or how little they know about the subject.

### Prewriting page limitations

- Stress the importance of using the prewriting page to analyze the prompt, prewrite, and plan. Teach students to draw the "hieroglyph" directly on their prewriting sheet for an expository piece as a reminder of what exposition (opinion/argument or informative writing) looks like. After the hieroglyph go their thesis and writing plan.

- Teach the writing plan, then teach how to do the prewriting without the plan by using T-charts or hash marks to plan.
- Model writing a draft directly from a plan. Some students can plan but may have difficulty going directly from the plan to the draft on the test booklet.
- Give writers copies of the KDE prewriting page to practice with so they can see exactly how much space they'll have to do all of this.
- Model the different expectations in length, expectations for finishing, and necessity for prewriting between a 30- or 40-minute assessment and a 90-minute assessment. If they have a full 90 minutes, the pieces will logically be longer and more finished; thus the student may need more time for prewriting and pre-thinking.

#### **Unknown or unfamiliar formats**

- When teaching, stress purpose over format. Students should be able to analyze a prompt, determine the purpose, and understand what that purpose looks like in any format.
- Use the hieroglyph as the basic structure for expository writing (opinion/argument or informative text). If students understand that, for any expository purpose, they need to begin broadly and come to the point/ thesis of their piece, to develop that thesis by a series of paragraphs, and to conclude by beginning with the thesis and broadening out, they will feel comfortable writing any expository format.
- Use models from different types of formats to teach purpose. For argument/opinion, students should see letters, editorials, speeches, essays, e-mails, blogs, proposals -- in fact, any form you can find that is grade-appropriate to illustrate how to make an argument or express an opinion.
- Back-map an appropriate model to determine the writer's plan. Since unfamiliar formats usually happen with expository writing, have students back-map some of the pieces you brought in to teach purpose. You can do the same thing with younger writers by having them cut up a model and paste it to the triangular and rectangular cut-outs that make up our model of a piece of expository writing. For narration, having them identify the BME of a narration will show them what a narrative looks like.
- Show writers how to take a basic writing plan and adapt it to different formats. They can put in a title, an engaging lead, and subheadings for an article; letter parts and a lead addressing the audience go in a letter; direct engagement and reference to an audience are hallmarks of a speech. The same basic plan can work for all of those formats.

#### **Understanding and addressing an audience appropriately**

- Give purposeful and specific attention to teaching students how to address different audiences.
  - Divide your class into three groups. Have each group take the same purpose and situation (tell about a class trip, the prom, an experiment you did in class, your vacation, etc.) but write to three different audiences. Read aloud and compare both the expectations of those audiences and the background the writers had to provide.
  - Pick a topic for students to argue or express their opinion on (cell phones should be allowed in school, the best pet is a dog, Disneyworld is the best place for a family vacation, we need a field trip, etc). Have small groups or partners brainstorm reasons. Then, randomly have 6-10 groups give one of their reasons without repeating the reasons that have been named before. Students write their reasons in large letters on long paper and one from each group stands in front of the class with the group's reason

on the paper. You pose an audience -- a parent, a 5th grader, a principal, etc. Let the class arrange the posted reasons in order of importance for that particular reader. There will be tons of conversation and, hopefully, strong awareness of the needs of the selected audience. Then, switch audiences and let them re-order. Students can do the same process by themselves with a list they make or even post-it notes they can reposition depending on the audience.

- Find advertisements that are audience-specific. Have students brainstorm audience awareness indicators within the ad. They can also re-imagine the ad for the same product and another audience.
- Examine a model of a piece that has a clear audience. Have class identify who the audience is and support with evidence of audience awareness in the piece. Lead the class through a discussion of what does that audience know, what does the audience need to know, what language would the audience use, etc.
- Hand students a list of arguments/ reasons to an opinion, such as "Every class should have a field trip" or "We need better school lunches." Have students prioritize that list by numbering the reasons in the order of importance that a specific audience (teacher, principal, parent, etc.) might respond to it. Then, if possible, ask that audience you have selected to fill out the same sheet to show students how well they had matched the top reasons.
- Provide multiple opportunities for students to write to different audiences, for different purposes. Deliberately assign On-Demand prompts that address a variety of audiences, from those which require a casual, friendly voice to those with a very formal tone.
- Use the reading-writing connection to make students constantly aware of tone and audience as you read together.

#### **Lack of prewriting or planning**

- Introduce the idea of planning as something everyone does in everyday life. We plan our menus, our vacations, our education. What would a trip be like if we didn't plan where we were going? Have this discussion with your group.
- Purposefully write an unplanned piece as a class. Let each student begin a story (fictional narrative) by freewriting for five minutes. Call time. They must stop, even if they are in mid-sentence, and pass their papers to the students behind them. The student on the end of each row brings his paper to student at the front of the row. After a minute to read what their fellow students have written, each student then writes for 3 minutes on the piece they have in front of them. Continue passing everyone's paper through the rows until everyone in the row has written on the piece. The last person to write must finish the piece. Have all members of the row gather their chairs together and share their pieces. Then have them talk about the pieces they had created together and how they could be better. Have them look for a beginning, middle, and end to each as well as other story elements. This will be a rich discussion, fueled by the lack of planning.
- Have students take one of those unplanned pieces and create a writing plan that would make it better.
- Teach students to backmap, to read a piece by another writer and figure out what the writer's plan was. Hand out a copy of a purpose-specific writing plan and have students plan the piece as the writer might have planned it.
- Make planning a necessity in your classroom. You can do this by stressing that drafting doesn't begin until they have a plan or even by giving them a grade for planning. By giving credit for each step of the writing process, you're sending a clear message about your expectations to all students.

- Do lots of plans with your students. Instead of writing each piece out every time, have students write several plans, then choose from the plans to write a piece.
- Use planning an On-Demand writing as a bell ringer or exit slip (stressing five minutes with a direct prompt).

### **Counter arguments**

- Help students see where and how to place the counter arguments in order to keep the counters from taking over the essay and defeating the argument. Ideally, the counter should be embedded at the beginning of arguments or in a separate paragraph that allows students to argue against the counter.
- Teach phrases that begin counter arguments: "some people say," "It's true that," "Granted," "Critics may argue," etc. Each of these phrases is followed by the argument that disproves the counter. For example, in an argument about which animal makes the best pet, a counter point to the idea of dogs showing unconditional love might read: "Some people may say that cats can be very affectionate: actually, it is the dog which is the most loving." The paragraph would then develop the idea of the dog's loving nature, perhaps as contrasted with the more aloof cat.
- Let younger students who are still learning about the opinion/argument actually talk to someone who might oppose their idea to start getting the idea of the counter. The more they experience, the more they'll be able to predict for themselves.
- Divide your classroom into two groups to plan and argue one side of a grade-appropriate controversial issue. The job of each side is to present their points while anticipating what the other side might say. In a true On-Demand fashion, you decide which side is making which argument.
- Use a writing plan which asks writers to consider what the other side might say to each of their arguments. Not all points must have a counter-point; however, it is good to consider which points would be best served with a counter argument .
- Create an opinion line in which students place themselves on a agree or disagree continuum for a controversial issue. The students on each end of the continuum make the argument to try to convince the students in the middle to move to their side. After the arguments have been presented, everyone in the middle must move one way or the other, even if it's a mere step. Have the whole group discussion of "What made you move that way?" and "What do you wish you had heard?" Stress the importance of dissembling the opposition by using the counter to weaken their arguments.
- Set up four possible answers to a controversial issue (4 political parties, 4 kinds of pets, 4 kinds of sports, 4 rewards for something in the classroom, etc.). Divide the class into the 4 groups to make their argument, trying to convince others in the room to move to their corner. Again, everyone must move. Have a discussion with the group of why they moved to the corner they chose, emphasizing the importance of details, examples, stories, and the counter-argument in that decision.
- Show political speeches or debates in which the counter argument is used effectively.
- Model, model, model. Counter-arguments may be a difficult concept at first, but the more students understand their use in an argument and the more they see that the counter doesn't and shouldn't weaken their argument, the more they'll learn to use it.

### **Passage-based prompts**

- Provide many opportunities in the classroom for students to find information from printed sources. Model how to skim and scan for information and answers, rather than plodding through an entire expository text.

- Teach students to look at the prompt first, to determine their perspective on an argument or the information they're looking to find in the passage. After they've established their thesis, they begin to skim and scan through the passage to find their paragraph topics, evidence to support their topics, and or specific information that would develop their topics.
- It may sound obvious, but stress the importance of actually using lines and details from the passage in the piece itself. The intent of the passage-based prompt is to determine whether students can use their reading to support their writing. Without citing information from the provided passages, the student is not fulfilling what he is being asked to do.
- With even younger students, be sure to model how to quote from a passage as opposed to how to paraphrase. Either is acceptable; however, teaching students to avoid plagiarism is just best practice.
- Ninety minutes is ample time for a more complete, more developed piece of writing. Model the difference between having 90 minutes and having 30 or 40 minutes. Students also have more time for planning, revising, and editing -- and should take it. The expectations for a more finished, more developed piece are evident in the released passage-based samples.
- Use a variety of topics and resources for passages. Some could be twin passages they read in your class, dual stories, a story and a poem, or pro and con arguments. One resource I've found is a site which supplies both the pro and con arguments to a wealth of topics, "Middle School Debate Topics" (<http://www.middleschooldebate.com/topics/topicresearch.htm>). Though it is a middle school site, many topics are appropriate for younger or older students.

#### **Idea development**

- Teach students to develop paragraphs in a variety of methods. Start with the 3.8, but, as the writer matures, so should his choices. Paragraphs basically can develop two ways: through illustration or logic. The 3.8, Comparison/Contrast, Extended Example -- all are paragraphs which develop their ideas through examples and details. Logical paragraphs such as Cause/ Effect, Extended Definition, Steps in a Process, or Logical Sequence depend on facts and logic for development. Ideally, a high school writer should be able to select from an inner menu of idea development strategies to pull out the perfect ones to argue his point or to inform his reader. Teachers build writers by making students responsible for not only deciding *what* to put in the piece but *how* to get that information across to the reader.
- Use the Reading-Writing Connection to make students consciously aware of what writers do and how writers develop their ideas. Use an inquiry of relevant pieces you've collected to help students create a list of appropriate development strategies that writers use in the "real world." Have them record their lists on chart paper, in their learning logs, or on a class website so that they can access those lists when they write.
- Use stories or picture books, articles, or arguments -- whatever you're studying -- to help students backmap the writer's overall plan and the type of development in each body paragraph. All writers plan: this just helps students feel that they have "cracked the code."
- Use some kind of acronym or organizer to remind students of the ways they can develop their ideas. One example is FAVES. In an argument are primarily five kinds of evidence:  
 F – Facts (definitions, statistics, laws, real event, etc.)  
 A – Analogies and comparisons (comparison, contrasts, similes, metaphors, etc.)  
 V – Voices (expert opinions, quotes)  
 E – Examples  
 S – Stories (factual anecdotes or extended true examples)  
 Without any of this evidence, an argument falls flat. They can also use FAVES to analyze the effectiveness of someone else's argument.

- Teach writers, especially young ones, the difference between points and examples, especially in a 3.8 paragraph. The points give general ideas, groups, parts, features, etc. The examples paint the picture of what that idea, group, part, or feature looks like. One is a telling sentence; the other is a showing sentence. Give students general points and let them write the "showing" sentence that would exemplify that point.
- You can also do this in pairs or groups of three. As the group is writing their 3.8 together, assign different jobs. One person writes the topic sentence. Another student figures out the three points under the topic. A third is the example person. He must give a specific example of each of the three points. The person who writes the topic sentence must also write the conclusion. Although, of course, the group members help each other, by dividing the task into three specific parts, they can better understand the difference between points and examples.

## Argument

Based on the Diedrich Scale in Kirby and Liner's *Inside Out*

- 1 - Weak
- 2 - Below average
- 3 - Good
- 4 - Excellent

.....  
Maintains focus on a clear argument or opinion 1 2 3 4

Displays awareness of audience through engagement and inclusion of needed background 1 2 3 4  
\_\_\_\_\_ x 5 = \_\_\_\_\_

Provides depth and variety of idea development 1 2 3 4

Logically organizes with clear organizational techniques 1 2 3 4  
\_\_\_\_\_ x 5 = \_\_\_\_\_

Utilizes appropriate and varied word choice and sentence structure 1 2 3 4  
\_\_\_\_\_ x 3 = \_\_\_\_\_

Maintains correctness 1 2 3 4  
\_\_\_\_\_ x 2 = \_\_\_\_\_

Total Grade \_\_\_\_\_

Comments:

## Argument/ Opinion

Based on the Diedrich Scale in Kirby and Liner's *Inside Out*

- 1 - Weak
- 2 - Below average
- 3 - Good
- 4 - Excellent

.....  
Maintains focus on a clear argument or opinion 1 2 3 4

Displays awareness of audience through 1 2 3 4  
engagement and inclusion of needed background  
\_\_\_\_\_ x 5 = \_\_\_\_\_

Provides depth and variety of idea development 1 2 3 4

Logically organizes with clear organizational techniques 1 2 3 4  
\_\_\_\_\_ x 5 = \_\_\_\_\_

Utilizes appropriate and varied word choice and 1 2 3 4  
sentence structure  
\_\_\_\_\_ x 3 = \_\_\_\_\_

Maintains correctness 1 2 3 4  
\_\_\_\_\_ x 2 = \_\_\_\_\_

Total Grade \_\_\_\_\_

Comments: