At the Core: Teaching Narrative, Argument, and Informative Writing to Struggling Writers

— William Van Cleave —
About CDL

Founded in 1992, the Center for Development and Learning (CDL) is a results-driven 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. CDL’s mission is to improve the life chances of all children, especially those at high risk, by increasing school success. We believe that all children, regardless of how they look, where they come from, or how they learn, can and will achieve school success when provided with highly effective teachers and positive, supportive learning environments.

CDL’s services fall into three silos:
1. Evidence-based professional development for teachers, principals, teacher leaders, related specialists, paraprofessionals, parents and caregivers
2. Direct services to students
3. Public engagement of stakeholders at all levels

CDL’s professional learning services comprise approximately 85% of our work. For over 18 years, we have been a trusted source of specialized professional learning services for educators. CDL’s professional learning is designed, facilitated, evaluated and adjusted to meet the needs of the learners. In collaboration with school and district leaders and teachers, we examine student and teacher data and build professional learning in response to student and teacher performance. We evaluate progress frequently and adjust accordingly.

We have special expertise in literacy, building collaborative capacity, leadership and talent management, high-yield teaching strategies and tactics, differentiated instruction, and learner-specific instruction. Call us – we are ready to serve you.
At The Core

Teaching Narrative, Argument, and Informative Writing

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N.J.I.D.A. • Friday, October 24, 2014

I. Fundamentals
   - Idea Generation
   - Categorization
   - Basic & Expanded Paragraphs
   - Developing an Introductory Paragraph

II. Narrative Writing
   - Similarities to Other Types of Writing
   - Pick an Event - Make a List
   - Elementary Students
   - Middle & High School Students

III. Argument Writing
   - Similarities to Other Types of Writing
   - Take a Stand - Make a List
   - Elementary Students
   - Middle & High School Students

IV. Informative Writing
   - Similarities to Other Types of Writing
   - Choose a Topic - Make a List
   - Elementary Students
   - Middle & High School Students
LIST GENERATION & CATEGORIZATION

Purpose:

- encourages students to generate ideas
- helps students learn to group, identifying similarities/differences
- simple, straightforward technique for brainstorming prepares for everything from a paragraph to a multi-paragraph essay
- non-threatening task (as spelling does not count and sentence structure is not required)
- lets the student know early on whether he/she has enough information for a paragraph/paper on the topic

Topics for Lists:

- begin with familiar topics that do not require outside research/investigation
- move towards content-based topics

Categorization:

- after generating a list, the student can decide upon categories for organizing it or...
- teacher can provide categories so that student can categorize as he/she generates

A Few Sample Category Clusters in Various Contents:

Social Studies/History:

Abraham Lincoln: physical, personal, pre-presidential, presidential, legacy
Historical Figure (in general): strengths, weaknesses, background, legacy
Branches of Government: legislative, judicial, executive
Country: demographics, culture, history, government, economy

Science:

Animal Kingdom (characteristics and/or examples):
- mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects
Climates: tropical, dry, temperate, cold, polar

English/Language Arts:

- specific character: physical description, thoughts/ideas, feelings, actions
- antagonists/protagonists
- characters with physical descriptions, personalities, motives
List of 10 Things

1. ____________________________ 6. ____________________________
2. ____________________________ 7. ____________________________
3. ____________________________ 8. ____________________________
4. ____________________________ 9. ____________________________
5. ____________________________ 10. ____________________________

Star the 3 items you like best. Each will become a supporting sentence.

Topic

Sentence

Supporting Sentence 1

Supporting Sentence 2

Supporting Sentence 3

Concluding Sentence
Introductory Paragraphs & Claims/Thesis Statements

The key to good, interesting writing is the development of a claim or thesis statement. Many students find them difficult. A vague or ill-considered claim or thesis can lead to a paper that wanders or loses steam. Worse, the wrong one can lead the student to write a plot summary of a book or event rather than a true paper.

I often say the following to students: “You should think of thesis statements as your own arguments.” The purpose of a multi-paragraph essay is to introduce your argument (not the author’s) and support it with appropriate evidence. We use thesis statements in everyday conversations. It’s often the way we communicate. We suggest something, and then we defend our suggestion. “Chicken soup is delicious” is a claim or thesis statement. As supporting evidence, one paragraph might mention that it’s good for curing colds, another might discuss the outstanding flavor, and so on. Even a simple statement such as “We should go to dinner now” is a thesis. The supporting evidence might not have to be spoken, but it is there. (We’ll be late otherwise, we don’t want to get in trouble, etc.)

Many of the assessments at both the state and national levels provide a prompt of some kind. Everything from the Common Core assessments to the A.C.T. and S.A.T. essay sections include a prompt. A good way to approach the introductory paragraph is as follows:

• Take a stand. (Take a position on or make a claim concerning your prompt.)
• Make a list. (List the reasons why you chose your position. These should NOT be sentences.)
• Write the fluff or introductory sentences. (These sentences are more general statements about the topic and can include a restatement of the prompt but in your own words. You might use the bulls eye approach above at right to help students develop these.)
• Write your claim or thesis. (Put your position into a good sentence, which will be the last sentence of your introductory paragraph.) Remember the following:

claim = thesis = argument
NARRATIVE WRITING

Narrative writing involves relating a story. Some narratives are autobiographical, some tell about an event the student witnessed or studied, and others are fictitious. Similar to process or step writing (and different from reason or persuasion writing), narrative writing requires the student to put events in chronological order.

Though length and sophistication will and should vary by skill and grade level, all narrative writing includes these characteristics:

- situation with characters and setting
- sequence of events
- conclusion

By the time a student is in sixth grade, narrative writing includes these additional components (highlights from the C.C.S.S.):

- sequence of events *that logically unfolds*
- use of dialogue, pacing, and description to develop characters and story
- use of transition words, phrases, and clauses
- conclusion *that follows from the story*

As the writer develops her craft, her writing will employ these characteristics (highlights from the C.C.S.S.):

- use of character reflection (Grade 8)
- establishment of problem, situation, or observation to engage reader (Grade 9)
- use of particular tone (Grade 11)

The graphic organizer on the following page can be used as a guide for narrative writing; notice that the Narrative Template is remarkably similar to the Basic Paragraph Template. It can be simplified for younger writers and those with more basic skills and expanded for older writers and those with more developed skills.

As students become ready to use dialogue and description to develop their events, they can expand the template by bisecting each of the Event boxes to allow for a Details section. They should generate details to elaborate upon the key events of their narratives and then determine how best to organize those details to support the events of their narrative pieces. For longer narratives, additional Event boxes can be added as well.

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**Notes:**

*The Narrative Template should not be used until the student has developed a list of events (brainstorming) that may be used to develop her narrative.*

*The Narrative Template can also be used to capture the essence of a story the student has read. This practice forges a strong connection between reading and writing and also assists with reading comprehension.*
<p>| Topic: ________________________________________________________________ |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting (time, place, atmosphere)</th>
<th>Characters (who, what)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situation/Problem/Conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event #1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event #2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event #3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution/Resolution to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation/Problem/Conflict</td>
<td>End/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**OPINION/ARGUMENT WRITING**

Opinion writing involves stating an opinion and supporting it. Elementary students should provide reasons for something they think or feel. The Common Core uses the term Opinion for younger students but shifts to Argument for older students. The argument these older students make is often called the claim or thesis statement. A subcategory of Argument Writing is Persuasive Writing, where the support is designed to convince the reader to share the writer’s point of view.

Though length and sophistication will and should vary by skill and grade level, all opinion writing includes these characteristics:

- opinion on book or other topic
- reasons to support opinion
- conclusion

Even at the 6th grade level, argument writing includes these components (highlights from the C.C.S.S.):

- claim (stand or thesis)
- organized reasons and evidence in support of claim
- use of credible sources
- use of phrases and clauses to clarify relationships among claims and reasons
- formal style
- conclusion (statement or paragraph)

As the writer develops his craft, his writing will employ these characteristics (highlights from the C.C.S.S.):

- recognition of alternate claims (Grade 7)
- recognition of and ability to distinguish position from alternate claims (Grade 8)
- ability to develop claims and counter claims fairly while pointing out strengths and weaknesses of each (Grade 9)

The graphic organizer on the following page should be used as a guide for opinion/argument writing; notice that this template is remarkably similar to a Basic Paragraph Template. It can be simplified for younger writers and those with more basic skills and expanded for older writers and those with more developed skills.

One way to expand it is to vertically bisect each of the Reason boxes to allow for a Details section. Students should generate many reasons in support of their arguments and then determine how best to organize them into categories, each of which will be represented by a supporting paragraph or section of their paper. One Reason box can be modified to allow for the counterclaim and the writer’s explanation and/or discount of that counterclaim, or the student can suggest and discount opposition for each reason as the paper progresses.
Opinion/Argument Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of 5 Reasons</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Star the 3 strongest reasons. Each will become a supporting element.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion/Claim</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reason #1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason #2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason #3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conclusion (Restates Opinion/Claim)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
RESPONDING TO AN ARGUMENT PROMPT

Take a Stand:
1. *Read the prompt carefully.* Make sure you understand it. Recognize both sides of the issue it addresses. **Underline** any key words.
2. *Take a stand.* This can often be a single word -- yes or no. Which side you **believe** doesn’t matter; choose the side you can best **argue** and **support** convincingly.

Make a List:
1. *Make a list of items that support your stand.* Support can come from personal experiences, information you’ve learned in your courses (e.g., historical events), movies you’ve seen, and books you’ve read.
2. *The list is essential.* It gets ideas on paper and frees up working memory so you can process, organize, and write cohesively about your topic. Also, if you aren’t able to generate a good list, it’s a good indicator that you aren’t ready to argue that side of the topic.

Write Your Introductory Paragraph:
1. *Begin with an engaging hook.* Begin with an anecdote, a quote, a surprising statistic, a catchy sentence -- something that grabs the reader and makes her want to read on.
2. *Then, provide broad, general statements about the topic.* This often involves rewording the prompt and explaining both sides of the issue. General information about the topic can be included in the opening sentences, but this is NOT the place to give away the side you wish to argue.
2. *Conclude the first paragraph with your thesis (claim).* The thesis (claim) is your argument, the position you intend to take. It should be a well-developed sentence that clearly states your position. Often, it will also indicate the key ways you will support it (one for each of the upcoming supporting paragraphs).

Generate Supporting Paragraphs (use for each of 2-3 paragraphs):
1. *Write a topic sentence that defends your argument.* Each supporting paragraph will make a different defense of your argument.
2. *Discount the opposition.* A strong argument often presents the other side and discounts it. (e.g., While some may argue..., On the one hand..., Some think...but)
3. *Present your evidence.* Provide support for your defense. Be specific to anchor the reader in your argument and make it stand out from other arguments on the same general topic.
4. *Conclude your paragraph.* Make sure the reader remembers the point you’ve made and how it ties back to your thesis.

Write Your Concluding Paragraph:
1. *Restate the issue under discussion.* Briefly mention both sides of the topic.
2. *Restate your position.* Discuss your side and the support you offered.
3. *Conclude with your opinion.* This is your last chance to convince the reader to support the side you took.
INFORMATIVE/EXPLANATORY WRITING

Informative/Explanatory writing involves examining a topic and sharing information about it. Part of the process here will be obtaining information about the topic. Students may need to develop highlighting, notetaking, and summarizing skills in order to accomplish this kind of writing.

Though length and sophistication will and should vary by skill and grade level, all informative/explanatory writing includes these characteristics:

- introduction of topic
- information about topic
- conclusion

Even at the 6th grade level, informative/explanatory writing includes these components (highlights from the C.C.S.S.):

- organization of ideas, concepts, and information
- development using relevant information
- use of appropriate transitions
- use of precise language and domain-specific vocabulary
- use of formal style

As the writer develops her craft, her writing will employ these characteristics (highlights from the C.C.S.S.):

- previewing of what is to follow as part of introduction (Grade 7)
- use of objective tone (Grade 9)
- natural progression of ideas (Grade 11)

The graphic organizer on the following page should be used as a guide for informational writing; notice that the Informative Template is remarkably similar to a Basic Paragraph Template. It can be simplified for younger writers and those with more basic skills and expanded for older writers and those with more developed skills. One way to expand it is to vertically bisect each of the Fact boxes to allow for a Details section. Students can then elaborate upon each fact.

As students become ready to use different kinds of information and transition words, phrases, and clauses, an expanded template may prove useful. The students should generate many pieces of information designed to explain their topic and then determine how best to organize them into categories, each of which will be represented by a supporting paragraph or section of their paper.
**Informative/Explanatory Template**

**Topic:**

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of 5 Facts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. ________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Star the 3 facts you want to use. Each will become a supporting element.

---

**Topic**

---

**Fact #1**

---

**Fact #2**

---

**Fact #3**

---

**Conclusion (Explains What Has Been Learned)**
STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING WRITING FROM SOURCE MATERIAL

Stage One: Highlighting:
• Students often either highlight everything or almost nothing. These practices usually indicate a lack of understanding of the purpose of highlighting or an inability (or unwillingness) to spend the time necessary to glean key information from the reading.
• Highlighting is hard work because it involves both reading and understanding the text and then choosing the most important words and phrases.
• Begin highlighting activities at the sentence level. (Newspapers and newsmagazines work well for this kind of activity.) Then, move to more difficult and longer text. (Textbook pages, photocopied in advance, work well for practice.)

Stage Two: Note-taking:
• Students are often asked to take several different kinds of notes:
  (a) copying teacher notes from the board/Powerpoint
  (b) taking notes from a source, either a textbook or a research source
  (c) taking notes from observations made when watching a movie, etc.
• Ask yourself the following questions:
  (a) What is the purpose of the note-taking activity?
  (b) What do I want students to do with the finished product?
These questions will enable you to determine how notes should be taken. Computer or by hand? Scaffolding provided? Etc.

Summarizing:
• Students find it difficult to write summaries without plagiarizing. Use the chart in the handout online (wvced.com) to teach students to write about source material without plagiarizing.
• Summaries are time-consuming to write. Part of the reason, though, is that they require student understanding of the material.
• Help students generate summaries as a group. Provide paragraphs, and ask students to help you generate a list of the key elements in them. Once a list is formulated, help them generate a paragraph from that list.

Paraphrasing:
• Paraphrasing is putting someone else’s text into your own words. Your product will be approximately the same length as the source material.
• Students, particularly those who struggle with comprehension and vocabulary, find it difficult to reword professionally written sentences.
• Begin by asking students to paraphrase individual sentences.
• Have students share these results to show their classmates that there are different possibilities.
Transition Words for Elementary Students

Temporal Transition Words (Process/Narrative Writing)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>first</th>
<th>second</th>
<th>third</th>
<th>last</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>before</td>
<td>later</td>
<td>afterward</td>
<td>at last</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>earlier</td>
<td>next</td>
<td>after that</td>
<td>at the end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>previously</td>
<td>soon</td>
<td>then</td>
<td>finally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at first</td>
<td>now</td>
<td>next</td>
<td>tomorrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yesterday</td>
<td>today</td>
<td>later in the day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the morning</td>
<td>then</td>
<td>in the evening</td>
<td>at the same time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in the afternoon</td>
<td></td>
<td>during</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>meanwhile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Opinion Transition Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>before</th>
<th>second, third, finally, last</th>
<th>because</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>first</td>
<td>etc.</td>
<td>but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one, one of the first</td>
<td>then, next, another, and, also, etc.</td>
<td>so</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Informative/Explanatory Transition Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>first</th>
<th>second, third, etc.</th>
<th>finally, last</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>one, one of the first</td>
<td>then, next, another, and, also, etc.</td>
<td>in conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one example</td>
<td>to start with</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These lists are for elementary students. Older students should use the Signal Words for Reading, Writing, & Notetaking list for reference instead.
### Signal Words for Reading, Writing & Notetaking

#### Direction Change & Contrast:
- A change in ideas to follow.
  - alternatively
  - although
  - as opposed to
  - at the same time
  - but
  - conversely
  - despite (the fact that)
  - different from
  - even so
  - even though
  - for all that
  - however
  - in contrast
  - in spite of (the fact that)
  - instead
  - nevertheless
  - nonetheless
  - notwithstanding
  - on the contrary
  - on the other hand
  - or
  - otherwise
  - rather
  - still
  - though
  - unlike
  - whereas
  - while
  - yet

#### Addition:
- Similar ideas, additional support, or evidence to follow.
  - additionally
  - again
  - also
  - and
  - another
  - as an example
  - as well
  - because
  - besides (that)
  - equally important
  - following this further
  - for example
  - for instance
  - for one thing
  - further
  - furthermore
  - in addition
  - in light of the...
  - it is easy to see
  - in particular
  - in the same vein
  - in the same way
  - just as
  - likewise
  - more (than that)
  - moreover
  - namely
  - next
  - other
  - pursuing this further
  - similarly
  - specifically
  - then
  - to illustrate

#### Conclusion, Summary & Emphasis:
- Conclusion, summary, or emphasis to follow.
  - accordingly*
  - after all
  - all in all
  - as a result*
  - because*
  - certainly
  - clearly, then*
  - consequently*
  - finally
  - for the reason (that)*
  - generally
  - hence*
  - in a word
  - in any event
  - in brief
  - in conclusion
  - in fact
  - in final analysis
  - in final consideration
  - in general
  - in short
  - in sum
  - in summary
  - in the end
  - indeed
  - last
  - lastly
  - naturally
  - of course
  - on account of*
  - on the whole
  - since*
  - so*
  - therefore*
  - thus*
  - to be sure
  - to conclude
  - to sum up
  - to summarize
  - truly

(* indicates cause and effect)

#### Sequence & Time:
- during
- earlier
- eventually
- finally
- first... second...
- third
- following
- immediately
- in the first place
- in the meantime
- later
- meanwhile
- never
- next
- now
- presently
- recently
- shortly
- simultaneously
- sometimes
- soon
- so far
- subsequently
- then
- this time
- when
- whenever
- while

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Note: The bent arrow signifies a change in direction while the two straight arrows represent words that continue in the same direction. The arrow on the right crosses a line to indicate an end point.

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