

(re) DESIGNING

ARGUMENTATION WRITING UNITS

for Grades 5-12

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Solution Tree | Press



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Introduction

If you're reading this, you may have already read *The Fundamentals of (Re)designing Writing Units*, the foundational book to this *(Re)designing Writing* series, and well understand the critical importance of writing to student learning, regardless of subject. This second book continues that discussion, emphasizing devising and conducting units of study centered on students writing an argumentation piece.

Writing in all its forms for different purposes is a necessary expectation across subject areas, and there are myriad opportunities for crafting an argument within disciplines. For example, in social studies, students write an argumentation speech from a politician's point of view arguing for a bill to be passed. In science, students can compose an argumentation essay to dispute animal testing, highlighting its liabilities. In mathematics, students justify their solutions to a problem in an abbreviated argument essay or journal write. In physical education, students write a letter to the editor in response to an article in the sports section on a controversial issue. In language arts, students can craft a literary critique that supports their position about a character's motive and how it impacts the plot. With any argument, students use evidence from credible, researched sources or literary texts—whatever is used as the basis for the writing—to defend their claims.

Mike Schmoker and Gerald Graff (2011) succinctly state the rationale for teaching this particular genre:

For decades, the most enlightened educators and academics have put [argument] at the center of education. They implore us to see that argument enlivens learning and is at the heart of inquiry, innovation, and problem solving. Education researchers like Robert Marzano, George Hillocks, and Deanna Kuhn have demonstrated that in-school opportunities to argue and debate about

current issues, literary characters, and the pros and cons of a math solution have an astonishing impact on learning—and test scores. Argument not only makes subject matter more interesting; it also dramatically increases our ability to retain, retrieve, apply, and synthesize knowledge. (p. 370)

Indeed, research around argumentative writing compels us to incorporate opportunities for written discourse so students can successfully articulate what they comprehend from content, expand and embed their learning, and then communicate it to others (Graham & Hebert, 2010).

About *(Re)designing*

I title these books *(Re)designing* because my goal is to help you rebuild or newly design and develop writing curriculum and deliver instruction with depth, rigor, and clarity. These books give you the guidance, tools, and wherewithal to be judicious and intentional about the following.

- **Designing new units:** Some of you may read these books and develop a writing unit from scratch. In the case of writing for argument, it can be focused on writing in a language arts class (literary critique), tied to a content area (argument essay about a leader who is more effective than another), or an interdisciplinary unit that culminates in an argumentation writing project.
- **Revising existing units:** Others may redesign an existing unit. This means you have taught a unit in the past or have one at your disposal and feel the need to revise all or part of it. Maybe you need to tweak lessons, make

the culminating assessment more rigorous, add more engaging activities, write or revise guiding questions, and so forth.

- **Critiquing a new or previously adopted textbook or curriculum:** You may use what you learn to ensure the published material meets rigorous standards. Some resources might include an overwhelming amount of effective (and ineffective) strategies, activities, assessments, pedagogy, writing ideas, and so on. With new knowledge, you can critique what is available and make conscientious decisions, such as revise, augment, or bypass mediocre material you encounter to create an effective, engaging writing unit that improves student learning and output.

The aforementioned foundation book, *The Fundamentals of (Re)designing Writing Units*, is a recommended prerequisite for each book that follows it, including this one. The following briefly summarizes that book; if you are familiar with its topics, you might choose to forego reading it and dive into this book's focus on argumentation.

- Chapter 1 summarizes the research related to writing and provides recommendations for instruction. It presents an overview of the different writing types—narrative, descriptive, expository, persuasive—and their characteristics, purposes, and associated genres. It also features a writing continuum to vertically and horizontally plot standards.
- Chapter 2 focuses on the six stages of the writing process and various instructional strategies: (1) prewriting, (2) drafting, (3) revising (through self-assessing and receiving feedback), (4) editing, (5) publishing, and (6) reflecting. Additionally, the chapter includes resources for digital communities and technology to be used throughout the writing process.
- Chapter 3 tackles the backward planning approach to unit design. This chapter highlights the beginning stage of this approach—identifying standards and using them to articulate what you want students to know (K), understand (U), and be able to do (D)—and discuss the role and provide

examples of unit- and lesson-guiding questions.

- Chapter 4 focuses on evidence of student learning, particularly culminating writing assessments. It features types of performance assessments, writing prompts and examples, student writing checklists, and rubrics—analytic and holistic—to use as instructional tools and assess writing with an emphasis on the former. This chapter also includes suggestions for using student writing models, as well as grading, calibration, and determining anchor papers.
- Chapter 5 moves to lesson design, specifically recommending the gradual release of responsibility model for teaching new learning (such as skill, strategy, or process). It explains each phase of this lesson approach along with a concrete lesson example, plus ideas for differentiating instruction.
- Chapter 6 is all about launching the unit. The text describes piloting the unit and reflecting on lessons to perfect the design and provides revision suggestions for the next time you teach this unit.

I intend for each book to guide you in designing and conducting a seamless unit of instruction for writing, one that raises the bar for students and builds teachers' capacity. All books in the series include templates, checklists, rubrics, writing prompts, assessments, instructional strategies and more—all couched in a backward design process—for you to plan a quality-driven unit that guides and empowers students to compose a sound written piece. For this book, the emphasis is on argumentation.

Who This Book Is For

This book is primarily for subject-matter teachers, curriculum designers, or literacy coaches who expect students to author argument-oriented content in grades 5–12. The *you* I address refers to any reader invested in delivering or designing curriculum aligned to argument writing in these grades. Those who serve elementary students may also find this book beneficial, as they can adapt the material as needed.

Although you can read this book independently, I recommend you work with colleagues to plan the argumentation writing unit together. Consider working as a department, a collaborative group within the context of a professional learning community, or on an interdisciplinary team since students are expected to write an argument in many different subjects.

Although language arts teachers are responsible for addressing a variety of writing and other literacy standards, subject-area teachers can expect students to produce a coherent and organized written piece. Therefore, collaborating with colleagues to identify which skills each will target and teach is crucial. This practice allows professionals to delineate expectations so skills do not become inadvertently missed assumptions. For instance, perhaps a science teacher focuses on the research skills necessary for the argument students will produce in this subject. The language arts teacher can focus instruction on sentence structure, appropriate conventions for citing text, formatting guidelines using MLA (Modern Language Association) style, consistent point of view, and other key writing skills. Teaming with others to identify the writing and research skills that you will each be accountable for will help ensure an optimal written piece. In *The Fundamentals of (Re)designing Writing Units* (Glass, 2017), I discuss and suggest creating a writing continuum as part of a curriculum mapping project that a school or district can undertake. The continuum articulates genres and related skills across grades and subjects to provide transparency so teachers can plan instruction accordingly and ensure students are aptly exposed to and taught necessary writing practices. You might consider spearheading or suggesting such a project.

If you teach in a self-contained classroom, collaborate with job-alike colleagues to brainstorm and create a unit together. Logistically, you and others could generate a Google Doc (or utilize another electronic collaborative tool) so each can contribute to the pieces that will eventually make the final product a robust argument writing unit. Some of you may be in a small district, where you are the only teacher for one or more grades or content areas. Maybe you can work virtually with colleagues in other counties or schools. Or consider collaborating with content-area teachers in or across appropriate grade clusters in your school and create a unit together to share. If these situations are not feasible, this book can still provide the necessary tools to re-envision what and how you teach writing to your students.

About Timed Assessment

Although this book will prepare students for standardized writing situations in which an argument is assessed, it is not about students responding to an on-demand argument writing prompt in a timed situation. You might issue such a prompt for different assessment purposes before or during instruction to gauge what students know and to inform your instruction. This book's focus is primarily designing or redesigning a complete and rigorous argumentation writing unit of instruction in which students advance through the steps of the writing process. As such, you can use an analytic rubric as an instructional tool and to score and gather information to improve the writing quality. When students participate in a demanding and engaging writing unit, it prepares them well for a district or state-mandated test:

In schools with a major emphasis on standardized tests, teachers are prone to conclude that their own assessments must always approximate the nature of the year-end standardized test so students will be “ready” for that test when it comes. . . . However, we ought not to lose sight of the fact that if all teaching is proscribed by the very limited and limiting format of a particular test, students’ learning experiences are woefully restricted. . . . If they learn better because of how we teach and assess them, it’s likely they will fare better on standardized tests than if we insist on teaching them in narrow ways that are ineffective for them. When learning “works” for a student, that student is likely to enter a testing situation both more competently and confidently than would otherwise have been the case, and outcomes should be predictably better. (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013, p. 46)

Avoid aligning every task you administer to a standardized-test-like prompt or situation. Teaching writing effectively across a range of genres supplies the necessary skills to embolden them to approach any writing situation with courage and assurance.

Book Organization and Contents Overview

This book takes a sequential approach to building an argumentation writing unit. Therefore, many chapters include exercises suggesting how you can apply what you've read so by the time you read the last page you will have a draft of your unit on teaching argumentation writing ready to develop and pilot. For this reason, I suggest targeting a particular area of your curriculum in which producing a written argument is the culminating assessment.

Chapter 1 explains the characteristic elements and structure for argumentation. It provides an orientation to designing the unit so that you are well versed in teaching writing for argumentation.

Chapter 2 details unit maps. A comprehensive unit map for argumentation shows the components of backward design in action. You can download and use this document as a resource for developing your own unit or use the blank template provided and start fresh.

Chapter 3 includes suggestions and specific examples for crafting a preassessment and a performance assessment task aligned to argumentation. In addition, I offer an argument checklist and rubric to use during instruction; the latter is also an assessment tool for the final writing piece. Grading suggestions are featured, as well.

Since presenting the checklist or rubric is critical to creating clear expectations, I share strategies for introducing and using these tools with students.

In chapter 4, you will find a detailed example for teaching students how to write argumentation introductions using the components of the gradual release of responsibility design model. It includes the step-by-step sequence and student materials so you can conduct the lesson.

Chapter 5 focuses on strategies, resources, activities, and assessments specific to argumentation. You can use what this chapter features to redesign or build your own lessons. For example, this chapter includes lesson ideas related to writing a thesis to stake a claim, acknowledging and addressing counterarguments, and more.

Once you complete the unit, it's time to pilot it and note what worked and what didn't. In this book's epilogue I suggest closing exercises.

The appendices offer a compilation of resources for you and for students. As mentioned earlier, the foundational book lists general offerings. This book includes additional resources specific to argumentation writing. I mention many resources throughout the book, but this list is a reference for easy access.