

Writing Instruction in EL Education Grades 3-8 ELA Curriculum

Overview

EL Education’s Common Core-aligned ELA curriculum modules were designed to help teachers build students’ capacity to read, think, talk, and write about complex texts. The modules are designed to fulfill the Common Core vision of students who are truly college and career ready. The modules address the reading standards for both literary and informational texts, the writing standards, the speaking and listening standards; the modules also incorporate a contextualized approach to many of the language standards. While this document focuses on writing, all strands of the ELA standards (reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language) are all tightly interwoven in the modules. Students need something to write or speak about, and discussion can be a way for students to effectively formulate their ideas before writing.

What Influences EL Education’s Approach

1. The Common Core vision of what it means to be college and career ready as writers.
2. The research base on writing instruction.
3. Recognition that writing is a skill that demands ongoing improvement. Students must develop perseverance and the capacity to problem-solve – both collaboratively and independently – to take concrete steps to improve.
4. Understanding of the importance of using Student-Engaged Assessment (clear learning targets, the use of models, critique, and focused feedback, focused revision and reflection) to support student growth.

Writing in the Modules: Aligned to the Common Core Vision and to Research

1. Writing is from sources and in a variety of modes

The authors of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) name writing from sources – specifically the ability to analyze and cite evidence from those sources to support one’s ideas in writing and speaking – as a critical “shift” required to prepare students for future success. Furthermore, researchers recognize that success in most domains of college, life and careers demands writing skills that, while not identical from one context to the next, often overlap. Students must learn to write flexibly in a variety of modes: “proficient writers [must] adapt their writing flexibly to the context in which it takes place” (Graham and Perin, 2007, p. 9). Reading and writing grounded in evidence is key to making good decisions as twenty-first century citizens and leaders. Citizens and leaders need to be able to engage in constructive, evidence-based discourse—for example, comparing notes by referring back to specific data, facts, and research.

Writing from sources, rather than relying on prior knowledge or personal experience, also ensures equity and access for all students. When writing from sources, all students have access to the same information, which helps to level the playing field for students without strong background knowledge or relevant experience.

In the modules

- The majority of writing tasks require students to write from sources.
- Students read to research, learn more about topics, and answer compelling questions. They sort, sift, and weigh evidence, rather than simply “reporting” on a topic. (For more information about the relationship between writing and research in the modules, see the separate document “Teaching the Research Standards in EL Education Grades 3-8 ELA Curriculum.”)
- Students write in multiple modes: they support opinions with evidence, use evidence to explain their ideas, and tell stories informed by prior learning.
- Students cite textual evidence in both formal assessments and in daily informal activities.
- Focused mini-lessons and activities help students analyze the use of effective evidence and apply this learning to their own writing.

2. Writing is grounded in deep, relevant content knowledge

Students who are college and career ready develop knowledge in a variety of subject areas, work actively with that knowledge and convey and refine their ideas through writing and speaking (CCSS ELA, 2011, p. 7). Research suggests that students’ writing is clearer and more developed when students deeply understand the topic about which they are writing. Students who write across the curriculum perform better in the content areas in which they regularly write about what they are learning (Graham, 2008; Graham and Perin, 2007; Reeves, 2004).

In “Knowing, Thinking, and Writing: Using Writing for Understanding to Help All Students,” Joey Hawkins suggests the following “writing for understanding” approach to teacher planning. This approach ensures that students deeply understand the content about which they are writing:

Enduring Understanding / BIG IDEA¹	
What understanding about the content will this writing show? What understanding about the craft of writing should it show?	
Essential Focusing Question	What question will I [as a teacher] pose so that students can see how to approach this work in a specific, appropriate, manageable way?
Building Working Knowledge	How will students gain the content knowledge they need to be able to work with this?
Processing the Knowledge	How will students select from and analyze the knowledge through the lens of the Essential Focusing Question, then capture it in notes so that they can use the ideas in their writing?
Structure	How will students know how to construct this piece of writing so that their thinking is clear, both to them as writers and to the readers of their work?
Writing Process	How will students use the writing process (draft, confer, revise) so that their final writing is clearly focused, organized, and developed to show understanding of the Big Idea?

¹ For more on the relationship between conceptual understanding and writing skills, see *Writing for Understanding* by the Vermont Writing Collaborative.

In the Modules

- The modules focus on building students’ content knowledge, often related to a compelling aspect of science or social studies standards for that grade level. For example in Grade 4 Module 3A, students build a knowledge of simple machines and the scientific concepts of effort, force and work. In Grade 8 Module 1, students explore social studies themes like the role of social, political and cultural interactions in the development of identity as they consider the challenges of fictional and real refugees.
- The “writing for understanding” approach, described above, has been used to ensure students deeply understand the content before they begin writing about that content.
- Students write about the topics and content that they have studied deeply through reading, discussion, and other activities.
- Lessons follow a coherent sequence to deepen students’ understanding of the topic.
- Writing tasks become increasingly complex.

3. Writing is strategically linked to reading, thinking and discussion

The Common Core portrait of a student who has mastered the standards (ELA, 2011, p. 7) names the ability to refine thinking and knowledge through writing. Research indicates that reading, discussion, and writing are deeply interconnected: students who have ample opportunity to read, think and talk about a topic demonstrate improved performance in writing (Nystrand, 1998). When students “write-to-think” they clarify their thoughts (Reeves, 2004, p. 190). And student discourse about the content of their reading serves as draft thinking or “oral rehearsal” of the ideas that will go into written work.

In the Modules

- The “writing for understanding” approach, described above, has been used to ensure students are given opportunities to build understanding and connections through reading, discussion and writing.
- Students read and re-read and engage in multiple experiences around a topic. (e.g. in 5th grade, students study the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), use this as a lens to analyze the novel *Esperanza Rising*, and then integrate articles from the UDHR into their Readers Theater adaptation of the novel).
- Strategic questioning and discussion protocols engage students in the thinking processes that scaffold towards effective writing.
- Deliberately interspersed opportunities for reading, discussion and writing all support the recursive nature of refining understanding.

4. Writing is frequent, varied and promotes student engagement

Students who are college and career ready must be able to adapt their communication to meet the demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline – including being able to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds (CCSS ELA, 2011, p. 7). Students learn to better write in ways that meet these demands when they are given diverse strategies and assignments in an environment that supports the developmental nature of learning (Hillocks, 1995). Asking students to write frequently—not only revised and polished papers, but quick responses to in-class reading – gives them opportunities to crystallize their thinking about a text and to draw conclusions based on the details they have noted. Such informal “writing to learn” activities also give teachers important opportunities to assess individual understanding. Teachers can better target student needs when they use frequent written assessments (formative and summative) that give them a wide range of useful diagnostic information (Reeves, 2004). And designing authentic writing tasks that engage students in collaboration and address topics relevant to their lives help students be willing to persevere to develop the complex skills of effective writing (Graham, 2008, p.4).

In the Modules

- Students have a wide range of writing experiences (aligned to CCSS W.10), with a balance of frequent informal writing, on-demand timed writing, and regular, formal, scaffolded writing to prompts.
- Students do formal (academic) writing in every unit (there are 3 units per module).
- Students do both “on-demand” writing tasks (to show what they can do independently) and more scaffolded writing tasks (to show what they can do with support).
- When possible, students write in formats that mirror authentic work and write for audiences beyond the teacher and classroom (e.g. in 4th grade Module 3, students write an editorial to an engineering magazine about the importance of simple machines).
- Carefully structured learning sequences support the developmental nature of learning to write.
- Written assessments provide teachers with a range of data to determine support needs.

5. Writing instruction is explicit, modeled, and scaffolded

The Common Core portrait of a student who has mastered the standards (ELA, 2011, p. 7) emphasizes the need for students to convey intricate or multifaceted information in an effective and articulate manner (CCSS ELA, 2011, p. 7). Research by Nystrand et. al. (1998) found that students made greater gains as writers when they had ample and supported opportunities to talk through their ideas. Hunt (2010) also notes that students benefit greatly when expert writers explicitly model and think aloud as they develop effective pieces. Using graphic organizers and other thinking guides and prompts support students to be strategic writers (Graham, 2008; Graham and Perin, 2007).

In the Modules

- Students are given time to think, discuss, and process information in various formats. This helps them develop clear ideas before structuring them in formal writing.
- Students use graphic organizers to help gather information and plan their writing. They are exposed to a variety of tools, and are encouraged analyze which formats work best for them.
- Students focus on one skill or strategy at a time. Teachers chunk specific standards, techniques and elements of writing with targeted mini-lessons, teacher modeling and practice opportunities for students.
- Students develop essential skills working with language conventions through contextualized, explicit grammar instruction that is tied to the demands of a specific writing task (e.g. in 4th grade, students learn to correctly punctuate dialogue when writing their research-based historical fiction about colonial times).
- Writing is carefully scaffolded using the “writing for understanding” approach (Vermont Writing Collaborative) to ensure students deeply understand what they are writing about and why, and can write their ideas eloquently.

The chart below shows the scaffolding plan for one unit in 7th grade Module 2A, noting specific instructional moves that help students build a clear purpose and enough content knowledge to then write an argument essay about a decision the main character makes in *Lyddie* (historical fiction regarding the mill girls in Lowell Massachusetts).

As you examine the chart, note how the reading, writing and speaking and listening strands are tightly interwoven in this unit. Students read in order to have something to write about and they speak in order to formulate their ideas for writing. Although students don’t actual begin formal writing until Lesson 13-15, from Lesson 1 students are involved in the “writing for understanding” approach by building working knowledge through close reading and taking notes. In Lessons 10-13 they are given multiple opportunities to process their knowledge orally, before they actually write. Also note how the writing process includes analyzing a model, using a rubric, planning and peer critique.

Scaffolding Plan for Argument Writing in 7th Grade, Module 2A

Lesson	Scaffolding	Writing for Understanding
Lesson 1	Introduce module topic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gallery Walk: working conditions then and now 	Essential Focusing Question Building Working Knowledge
Lesson 2-3	Launching <i>Lyddie</i> (RL.7.3) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce setting and character Introduce reading routines: model entry task, Reader's Notes, strategies for reading <i>Lyddie</i> (focus on using context clues for close reading) 	Building Working Knowledge
Lessons 4-5	Learning about <i>Lyddie</i> as a character (RL.7.1, RL.7.3, L.7.4) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Close reading of key excerpt to learn about <i>Lyddie</i> Synthesis of Reader's Notes for Chapters 1-7: Acrostic poem 	Building Working Knowledge
Lessons 6-8	Working Conditions in the Mills (RL.7.1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce Working Conditions anchor chart Analyzing word choice to understand working conditions 	Building Working Knowledge
Lesson 9	Mid-Unit 1 Assessment: Working Conditions in the Mills (RL.7.1, RL.7.3, L.7.4)	
Lessons 10-11	Framing <i>Lyddie</i> 's decision and forming evidence-based claims <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce focus question Close reading/rereading Forming evidence-based claims (orally) Forming evidence-based claims (teacher modeling) Forming evidence-based claims (graphic organizer) Generating reasons for and against (orally) Quote sandwich guide (orally) 	Essential Focusing Question Processing the Knowledge
Lesson 12	Generating Reasons: Should <i>Lyddie</i> Sign the Petition? (W.7.9) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reread key passages <i>Lyddie</i>'s decision anchor chart: reasons for and reasons against Quote sandwich: connect reasons to evidence (oral rehearsal w turn and talk) 	Processing the Knowledge

Lesson	Scaffolding	Writing for Understanding
Lessons 13-15	Writing an Argument Essay (building knowledge of writer's craft) (W.7.1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define argument (entry task) • Revisit rubric from Module 1 • Introduce academic vocabulary re written argument (writer's glossary) • Read model essay for gist/content • Introduce essay prompt • Distinguish between explanatory essays and argument essays (Venn) • Students explain essay prompt (exit ticket) • Oral rehearsal (Take a Stand protocol) • Practice crafting claims • Analyze model essay for content/evidence: What is the author's argument? • Analyze model essay for structure/craft: What makes a strong argument? 	Structure Writing Process
Lesson 16	Planning the Argument Essay <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing improvement tracker • Planning the essay (graphic organizer) • Reflecting on planning 	Writing Process
Lesson 17	Peer Critique of Essay Plans (not of full drafts) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criteria for critique: kind, specific, helpful feedback • Peer critique of plans 	Writing Process
Lesson 18	Drafting (W.7.1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher feedback based on rubric due back by Lesson 20 	Writing Process
Lesson 19	Oral Synthesis: World Café	Processing the Knowledge
Lesson 20	Revising <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused Mini-lesson 	Writing Process

6. Student-engaged assessment practices promote high quality written products

The Common Core clearly indicates that students must become self-directed learners who can use resources to support their own learning (CCSS ELA, 2011, p. 7). Research by Brookhart and Moss (2008) underscores that student achievement increases when students participate in formative assessment that helps them be metacognitive about their learning: where they are, where they are going, and how to close the gap (Chappuis, 2009). The formative assessment process – including the use of models, critique, and descriptive feedback – helps students become resilient learners who see learning as a process and who can strategize and problem-solve to address new and unforeseen challenges (Brookhart & Moss, 2008, p. 10-12). When students critique models, they develop a clear understanding of the characteristics of quality writing in various formats and for diverse purposes (Graham and Perin, 2007; Hunt, 2010). And as Reeves (2004) notes, developing clear rubrics with students and using those rubrics consistently increases students’ understanding of criteria for success; this practice yields improvements in the most challenged populations. Descriptive feedback that is focused and specific can have a powerful impact on student learning: “the level at which the feedback is focused influences its effectiveness” (Brookhart, 2008, p. 4). Students who are taught to identify and correct their own errors are more likely to make long-term gains (Beach and Friedrich, 2006).

All writing instruction lives within a collaborative classroom culture. Students work together throughout the writing process to support their own learning: they discuss text(s) in pairs or small groups to develop and formulate ideas before writing, they support each other throughout the writing process with continuous opportunities to share and discuss their work, and – during the revision process – they provide kind, constructive peer feedback based on rubrics or criteria lists. Promoting a culture of collaboration and achievement helps students to create high quality written products.

In the Modules

- Students participate in ongoing student-engaged assessment (SEA), including the use of models, critique, and descriptive feedback.
- Students work with teachers to develop rubrics and criteria lists, which further clarifies their vision of quality writing and empowers them to gather data on their progress.
- Teachers are given coaching points for what to listen and probe for when conferring with students about their writing.
- Teachers are given guidance on how to effectively assess student work based on the CCSS, as well as rubrics to ensure they provide students with focused, specific, helpful feedback to guide students’ revisions.
- Specific and strategically timed lessons teach students the essential collaborative skills of giving and receiving feedback on their writing, so students can take appropriate action to improve.

What is Not Included in the EL Education Grades 3-8 ELA Curriculum, and Why

The EL Education Grades 3-8 ELA curriculum modules were designed to help teachers develop students’ capacity to read, think, discuss, and write about complex texts. Lessons for grades 3-5 are just 60 minutes long; lessons for grades 6-8 are 45 minutes long. Given these time constraints, the modules reflect strategic decisions to incorporate most, but not all, of the CCSS.

The most basic language standards are addressed when appropriate to the context of a task or lesson. Certain elements of a typical literacy curriculum are not included. For example:

- The modules do not include decontextualized teaching of writing skills (i.e. stand-alone lessons about parts of a sentence or proper use of commas). This type of instruction has its place. But since students' skill acquisition becomes increasingly varied as they progress through the grades, some of this instruction is best addressed in small groups with opportunities for differentiation. Teachers are encouraged to add these specific lessons based on the needs of their particular students.
- The modules do not include explicit instruction on all parts of speech, phonics, decoding, letter-sound correspondence, etc. Some Common Core language standards are addressed in context, rather than as a separate scope and sequence (e.g. additional literacy instruction that includes small groups and guided reading). The modules rarely include writing purely from students' imaginations (3rd grade has one exception, when students write an imagined scene based on their study of *Peter Pan*). Most teachers have considerable experience with supporting more pure, imaginary narrative writing; therefore the modules strongly emphasize writing from sources.
- The Grade 3-5 modules presume that students will have an additional literacy block "above and beyond" and alongside the modules. For suggestions for writing instruction during this additional literacy time, see the Foundational Reading and Language Standards Resources Package for Grades 3-5, specifically the section on "Show the Rule."² Such additional writing could be aligned to W.1, W.2, W.3, as well as L.1, L.2, and L.3.
- Since the modules emphasize scaffolded writing, teachers may wish to provide more opportunities for quick, on-demand writing tasks (such as entrance tickets, exit tickets, and quick writes to synthesize information after discussion). Teachers also may want to give students more opportunities for on-demand extended response writing.

Taken as a whole, the purpose of the EL Education Grades 3-8 ELA curriculum is to bring the Common Core Standards and "Shifts" to life for teachers and students. The writing instruction embedded in all modules reflects this purpose, inviting teachers to envision what is possible, and giving them the tools they need to help students write clearly and effectively about compelling topics.

² Used by permission, Eloise Ginty, Vermont Writing Collaborative. For more information and resources, go to www.vermontwritingcollaborative.org

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