***In Common* Frequently Asked Questions**

A Common Core Implementation Resource for Writing Instruction

The Common Core Writing Standards describe three broad “types” of writing and emphasize the integration of content understanding and writing. Teachers have long believed that learning to write well is important – essential, even. However, what this actually looks like in the classroom, especially for struggling students, has often eluded us. This collection is intended to be the beginning of a resource which can help both students and teachers better understand the qualities of effective writing. We hope this bank of annotated student work will provide a foundation for analysis and discussions that lead to a deep and nuanced understanding of the Common Core Writing Standards.

***What is “In Common”?***

*In Common* is a collection of K-12 student writing samples gathered from classrooms across the country. The resource is organized into three main sections, based on the three types of writing required by the Common Core State Standards for writing: argument/opinion writing, informative/explanatory writing, and narrative writing. Each main section is further subdivided into two subsections, “On-Demand Writing” and “Range of Writing.”

***On-Demand Writing Sections***

These sections contain pieces written in response to a uniform text-based prompt. For each of the three, Common Core writing types, two adaptable assignment templates were designed, one for students in Grades K-5, and another for students in Grades 6-12. Each basic template was then used to create a set of similar, grade-specific prompts within the broader K-5 and 6-12 clusters. The language of the prompt, the text used, and some of the conditions of administration vary, but the question that focuses the writing remains the same across the grade levels within each cluster. For example, in Kindergarten, students listen to a Reader’s Theatre presentation about saving water and then write and illustrate a short informative piece in response. The corresponding fifth grade prompt begins with an article on water conservation, and students respond by writing a full informative essay. Although specific aspects of each prompt have been adapted to meet developmental needs, both prompts present the same focusing question, “What can you do to save water?” Similarly, at grades 6-12, all students read texts about the effects of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Students at grades 9-12 read an additional, more complex text, but all students respond to the same prompt, “What effect did the Great Depression have on people who lived through it?”

**Using one topic for grades K-5 and one for grades 6-12 results in a unified set of student pieces. This makes it easy for teachers to see and understand the developmental spectrum described in the CCSS.** These pieces can be used to highlight developmental progressions in the Standards, as well as to build an understanding of grade-specific goals and expectations.

***Range of Writing Sections***

These sections contain a variety of pieces spanning K-12, in each writing type specified by the Common Core State Writing Standards 1-3. These pieces provide examples of writing for “a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences”, over both extended and shorter time frames. **These parts of the collection are designed to illustrate a breadth of student writing aligned to the CCSS, and to spark ideas about how writing can be integrated throughout the curriculum.**

Each piece in the collection is annotated using the words of the Common Core State Standards for a particular grade level and writing type. Using authentic student work to interpret the descriptors in the Standards can help teachers to develop a clearer conception of what writing aligned to the Common Core might look like. A variety of pieces have been included to encourage a broad and flexible understanding of the writing standards.

***What is the purpose of the project?***

The Common Core Standards offer a new way of thinking about the role of writing in the classroom. Both teachers and students will need many and varied examples if they are to understand what the Standards are asking and what effective writing might look like at different developmental levels. The purpose of this Common Core instructional resource is to help educators (and students) develop a clearer understanding of the qualities of effective writing as described in the Standards and to provide some examples of how writing can be meaningfully integrated within the curriculum.

A few cautions in using the resource:

* It is important to note that these pieces are **examples** of competent writing at each grade level, **not benchmarks.** While these samples may help teachers to identify strengths and weaknesses in a program or in a piece of student work, **they should not be used in scoring.**
* The pieces have been chosen specifically to illustrate the three writing types described in Common Core Writing Standards 1, 2 and 3 (Argument/Opinion, Informative/Explanatory and Narrative). **Mastery of conventions (spelling, punctuation, capitalization) was not evaluated** in choosing and annotating these pieces. While each piece was chosen to be a developmentally appropriate example of the Common Core WritingStandards, the student work in this collection may or may not reflect the Common Core Language Standards and should not be used to gain a clearer understanding of those Standards.

As a profession, our understanding of the Common Core is evolving and will undoubtedly grow more nuanced as teachers experiment with new ways to teach, as data emerges from large scale assessments, and as our students reap the benefits of a coordinated K-12 progression of English Language Arts standards. The pieces in this collection are meant to be a starting point for inquiry and discussion, not a final destination.

***Who created In Common?***

*In Common* is an instructional resource created for teachers, by teachers. Over a year in the making, the collection is a joint project of the Vermont Writing Collaborative and Student Achievement Partners.

***The Vermont Writing Collaborative***

The Vermont Writing Collaborative is a non-profit organization, founded by five public school teachers, whose mission is to help all students, K-12, write thoughtfully and effectively. The Vermont Writing Collaborative brings passion, ongoing on-the-ground classroom experience, and expertise in literacy to this project.

***Student Achievement Partners***

Student Achievement Partners is a non-profit organization that assembles educators and researchers to design actions based on evidence that will substantially improve student achievement. Founded by three of the contributing authors of the Common Core State Standards, Student Achievement Partners is devoted to accelerating student achievement for all students by supporting effective and innovative implementation of the Common Core.

***How were student papers collected and reviewed?***

Here is a brief overview of the process:

* With the help of the Council of the Great City Schools, Student Achievement Partners and other state and district volunteers too numerous to name reached out to a national network of teachers, requesting student work. Over 1,600 pieces were submitted by more than 80 teachers in nearly a dozen different CCSS-adopting states.
* *In Common* Project Leaders refined their understanding of the Common Core Standards through collective study and discussion, including conversations with two contributing authors of the ELA CCSS and, with their help, used the student work submitted to assemble grade-specific packets for further review and discussion.
* At an intensive two-day retreat, teams of teachers and literacy specialists met to develop a shared understanding of the language of the Standards and to review the student work. Teachers were divided into grade cluster teams (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12). Each team was charged with identifying pieces, by a consensus process, that would be useful in helping teachers understand **Common Core Writing Standards 1, 2, and 3** (argument/opinion, informative/explanatory, and narrative) at each grade level.
* These pieces were then annotated to reflect the teams’ thinking and to connect specific parts of the student work to descriptors in the Common Core Writing Standards.
* A second call for papers requested additional pieces in areas of need, and members of the Vermont Writing Collaborative and Student Achievement Partners began informally testing individual pieces in the field through professional development and focus group sessions.

***Where is the project now?***

The Common Core Standards are meant to broaden, not narrow, our understanding of effective writing. This resource has a similar purpose. **It is intended to be a “living document”, which will be added to, revised, and improved as more teachers and students work with the Common Core Standards.**

We welcome your feedback and ideas as we move forward in this process. We hope that *In Common* will be widely used as a growing, flexible, and useful resource for educators working to implement the Common Core State Standards in K-12 classrooms throughout the country.

Student Achievement Partners

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The Vermont Writing Collaborative

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