



CHECKING IN UPDATE: MORE ASSIGNMENTS FROM REAL CLASSROOMS

APRIL
2016



The Education Trust

TO THE POINT

- ▶ In this follow-up report, we provide a revised Literacy Assignment Analysis Framework that incorporates discussion and teacher scaffolding. This new framework can serve as a guidepost for studying sets of assignments across multiple days or weeks within a single classroom, school, or district.
- ▶ A closer look at more assignments from real classrooms provides a helpful lens for thinking about five key areas related to standards implementation: Common Core Alignment, Discussion, Teacher Scaffolding, Text and Task Complexity, and Motivation and Engagement.
- ▶ Context matters! While we don't expect or recommend that every assignment addresses every indicator on the framework, practitioners must consider how often students work on extended tasks that align with the rigor of the Common Core; gather and cite textual evidence; think at high cognitive levels when they read, discuss, and write about texts; and receive support from teachers as they engage in interesting and meaningful tasks.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joan Dabrowski (joandabrowski@gmail.com) is a writer and literacy consultant based in Massachusetts. She has worked as a K-2 and 4-5 teacher, K-8 literacy coach, and pre-K-12 director of literacy. Her book, *Interactive Writing Across Grades: A Small Practice with Big Results, PreK-5*, was recently published by Stenhouse Publishers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to Sonja Brookins Santelises and Keith Dysarz for their steadfast leadership and commitment to the *Equity in Motion* series and to the *Literacy Assignment Analysis Project*. Additional appreciation to those who supported this publication:

- Carlton Jordan and Nakeia Drummond provided both content expertise and collegial support along the way.
- James (JJ) Morrissey and Brad Belin shared their curriculum units and assignments in history.
- Pam Pelletier, Holly Rosa, Kris Grymonpre, Liz Baker, and the Boston Public Schools science department shared their ongoing work centered on science and literacy in collaboration with Dr. Kate McNeill, associate professor of science education at Boston College.

SUPPORTING THE DAILY WORK OF EDUCATORS



Students can rise no higher than the assignments and instruction they receive from educators. This simple, yet important, idea is what guides The Education Trust’s practice work with district leaders, school leaders, and classroom teachers as they implement higher, more rigorous college- and career-ready standards for their students. In some cases, assignments can be powerful launching pads: Students read, write, think, and discuss in strategic ways, using the themes, ideas, and contradictions in complex texts to guide them.

Yes, daily assignments matter.

Yet, as our initial analysis of assignments in middle-grades classrooms found, we must do better — particularly on the quality of assignments that our low-income students and students of color receive. We examined thousands of assignments and found examples of both high- and low-range tasks, a few of which we included in our first report.

Still, many of you requested more examples as you continued to wonder ... **what *does* a strong literacy assignment look like for middle schoolers in English language arts? In science? In social studies/history?** “Checking In: More Assignments From Real Classrooms” answers that question. In this newest publication in our *Equity in Motion* series, we provide an updated Literacy Assignment Analysis Framework, as well as six example assignments in grades six to eight from ELA, science, and history/social studies classrooms.

We hope these annotated assignments will offer further examples of individual assignments’ strengths and areas for improvement. Even more important, we hope these examples will spark action-oriented discussions that promote positive changes in our practice and enhance our students’ learning.

Keith Dysarz

Director of K-12 Practice
The Education Trust

CHECKING IN UPDATE: MORE ASSIGNMENTS FROM REAL CLASSROOMS

BY JOAN DABROWSKI

REVISED LITERACY FRAMEWORK

WHY A FRAMEWORK?

The framework is our guidepost for rigorous literacy assignments. It's driven by four domains: alignment to the Common Core State Standards, text centrality, cognitive challenge, and the opportunity for motivation and engagement. It informs our analysis as it enables us to:

- identify patterns and trends across multiple assignments, subject areas, and grade levels
- consider the similarities and differences between and among schools in a single district and in multiple districts across the country

More broadly, the framework can:

- drive fact-based conversations about the types of assignments students are and are not receiving
- influence district and state policy and practice by shining light on any inequity in the rigor of assignments
- sound a call to action that generic implementation of college- and career-ready standards will not be sufficient to overcome the inequities in assignments given to different groups of students

WHAT'S NEW IN THE FRAMEWORK?

In our initial analysis of over 1,500 assignments, two unanticipated topics emerged that deeply informed our findings and resonated with both our partnering schools and many of our colleagues in the field: *discussion* and *teacher scaffolding* (*teacher supports*).

We have added and operationalized these areas and will consider them as we analyze more assignments in additional districts and states. You will notice discussion and teacher scaffolding are called out specifically in several of the new sample assignments presented here.

Discussions, as outlined in the Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards, hold importance as middle school students are expected to practice and refine the elements of argumentation as they:

- comprehend and consider the ideas of others
- collaborate with peers
- present knowledge and their own ideas with conviction, authority, and clarity

Moreover, discussions serve as a powerful tool for equity and support as student thinking is shared and considered by all. As we analyze assignments that include evidence of discussion, we consider both the structure and the content of these interactions.

Teacher scaffolding speaks to the temporary supports teachers provide for students as they work toward independence. Scaffolding can:

- range from light to heavy as teachers provide more or less support
- be present at particular moments within an assignment
- be ongoing, existing at each stage of the task for all students *or* only for those who need it
- appear in different forms in assignments (e.g., text annotation, graphic organizers, discussion)

HOW CAN PRACTITIONERS USE THE FRAMEWORK?

We encourage *you* to use the framework:

- as a guidepost for studying sets of assignments across multiple days or weeks within your classroom, school, or district
- to inform the work of teachers and curriculum developers as assignments are created and revised

We add a note of caution about its effectiveness when examining a single assignment. And, we caution against the notion that every *individual* assignment in a given classroom should include *every* feature or meet *every* indicator on the framework. Rather, practitioners are encouraged to look across multiple assignments to determine when and how often students are:

- working on extended tasks that align with the rigor demanded by college- and career-ready standards
- gathering and citing textual evidence
- thinking at high cognitive levels as they read, discuss, and write about complex texts
- receiving light or heavy supports from teachers as they work toward independence, engaging in tasks that hold relevance and support adolescent autonomy

LITERACY ASSIGNMENT ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

1. Alignment With the Common Core

A Common Core-aligned assignment for ELA/literacy has essential features. First, and foremost, it must be aligned to the appropriate grade-level standard. The standard(s) then set the frame for instructional goals and the assignment's content and tasks. Alignment also means that the assignment embraces the instructional shifts articulated by the Common Core. In ELA/literacy, these shifts require students to have regular practice with complex texts and their academic language; read, write, and speak using evidence from texts, both literary and informational; and build knowledge through content information. Finally, an aligned assignment is clearly articulated so that students can fully understand what is expected of them.

Indicators

- The assignment aligns to the appropriate grade-level standard.*
- The assignment clearly articulates the task.

Questions to Guide Practitioners

- How often do students read, discuss, and write about complex texts in my classroom in a way that honors the spirit of the Common Core?
- How do I ensure that my assignments and expectations for student work are clear? What language and guidance do I provide to ensure clarity?

2. Centrality of Text

Texts hold a fundamental place in the area of literacy. In an assignment, the centrality of text permits students to grapple with key ideas, larger meanings, and author's craft and intent. Students must have the opportunity to display increasing expertise in interpreting and responding to a text and draw evidence from a text to justify their responses and thinking. Such skills are essential to postsecondary success and undergird the pedagogical shifts. Specifically, an assignment fully reflects this centrality of text when students are required to cite evidence (e.g., paraphrasing, direct citation) to support a position or claim.

Indicators

- The assignment solicits text-based responses. Student use of the text is vital to successfully complete the assignment.
- The assignment requires students to cite evidence from the text.

Questions to Guide Practitioners

- Do I ask students to interpret and respond to complex texts? When? How often?
 - Do I require students to cite textual evidence in order to support or develop a claim? When? How often?
 - How do I select texts for my students to read?

3. Cognitive Challenge

The cognitive work required to retell a story, identify facts from a text, analyze a character using textual evidence, or apply knowledge gained from multiple texts to form a new idea ranges from simple to complex. Generally, the cognitive challenge increases through text-dependent questions and assignments that require student documentation of their deep analysis or the construction of new knowledge. Our framework utilizes Norman L. Webb's Depth of Knowledge Levels. Additionally, as students grapple with complex subject matter, we believe the expectation of an extended written response (multiple paragraphs) — which is governed by the accepted practices of the discipline — most strongly supports such thinking.

Indicators

- The assignment requires high levels of cognitive demand.
- The assignment is linked to the creation of a piece of extended writing.

Questions to Guide Practitioners

- When and how often are students assigned to complete an extended writing piece that includes their original thinking/ideas supported with/by textual evidence?
- When and how often are students expected to work through the writing process (plan, draft, revise, edit, and publish) with an extended writing piece?

DOMAINS OF RIGOROUS STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS

4. Motivation and Engagement

For adolescent learners to thrive and achieve at high levels, educators must embrace both the content of the curriculum and the design of instruction. Each of these elements impact student attention, interest, motivation, and cognitive effort and must be considered in the design of assignments. Specifically, we prioritized two key areas: choice and relevancy. Students must be given some level of autonomy and independence in their tasks — with rigor maintained across all options. And the tasks must be relevant as they focus on poignant topics, use real-world materials and experiences, and give students the opportunity to make connections with their goals, interests, and values.

Indicators

- Students have choice in the assignment in one of the following areas: task, product, content, process, or text. Rigor is maintained across all options.
- The assignment focuses on a poignant topic, uses real-world materials, and/or gives students the freedom to make connections to their experiences, goals, interests, and values.

Questions to Guide Practitioners

- Are there opportunities for my students to bring their own ideas, experiences, and opinions into the assignments I give them? If so, when and how often?
- How do I bridge the known to the unknown for my students? Or, how can assignments in my classroom offer students the opportunity to experience rigorous content — which may be unfamiliar or feel "foreign" — in a way that feels relevant for them?
- When and how do I give students choices in their assignments that support their autonomy?

*To meet this indicator, an assignment was aligned with at least one specific grade-level standard aside from R.10 or W.10 in the ELA and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects.

LITERACY ASSIGNMENT ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

ADDITIONAL FEATURES ANALYZED



Texts

Assignments were analyzed to determine whether or not a text was required. Additionally, we captured:

- Text type: (e.g., literature, informational, visual text, multiple texts, websites, etc.)
- Text length: (e.g., full-length text, text excerpt, chapter, etc.)



Writing Output

Assignments were analyzed to determine the amount of writing required. Writing output was defined as:

- No writing
- Note-taking
- One to two sentences
- Multiple short responses (e.g., an assignment that requires a student to answer three questions, and each question requires one to two sentences for it to be answered)
- One paragraph
- Multiple paragraphs



Length of Assignment

Assignments were analyzed to determine how long students were given to complete. They were categorized in the following time increments:

- Fifteen minutes or less
- One to two class periods
- Long-term assignment (multiple weeks)
- An assignment linked with an ongoing project



Student Thinking

Assignments were categorized based on the level of student thinking required, as defined by Norman L. Webb's Depth of Knowledge Levels. These levels are:

- Recall and Reproduction
- Basic Application of Skills/Concepts
- Strategic Thinking
- Extended Thinking



Discussion

- **Structure** (e.g., informal, brief, "turn and talk," formal, debate, extended)
- **Content & Purpose** (e.g., work collaboratively on a task, manage logistics, engage in debate, present knowledge and ideas using textual evidence, reasoning, consider and evaluate the ideas of others)



Scaffolding (Teacher Supports)

- **Level and Frequency:** (e.g., minimal, moderate, heavy, brief sections, throughout the entire assignment)
- **Type:** (e.g., graphic organizers, note-taking, annotation, informal discussion, small discrete tasks, all steps are provided)

NEW ANNOTATED ASSIGNMENTS

INTRODUCTION

The following assignments represent a range of middle school grades and subjects and were collected from schools with different student demographics. They fall within the low, mid and high range on the framework.¹ Assignments that fall within the high range are worthy of careful consideration as they — and assignments like them — hold much promise for middle school students. For each assignment, we first note how it scores on the framework and then list the details that support the scoring. In the second half of the annotation, we highlight particular key areas of the assignment that stood out for us and pose questions for you to consider.

KEY AREAS

- **Alignment to the Common Core** addresses the assignment’s connection with the appropriate grade-level standard(s). Alignment also considers whether or not an assignment embraces the *spirit* of the Common Core: for students to engage frequently in critical thinking through reading, discussing, and writing about complex texts and topics across disciplines.
- **Discussions** are important because middle school students are expected to practice and refine the elements of argumentation as they comprehend and consider the ideas of others; collaborate with peers; and present knowledge and their own ideas with conviction, authority, and clarity. We consider both the structure and the content of these interactions.
- **Teacher Scaffolding** speaks to the temporary supports teachers provide for students as they work toward independence. Scaffolding can range from light to heavy as teachers provide greater *or* lesser support. It can also be present at particular moments within an assignment, be ongoing — existing at each stage of the task for all students or only for those who need it, and appear in different forms in assignments (e.g., text annotation, graphic organizers, discussion).
- **Text and Task Complexity** acknowledges the tension that may exist when middle school teachers assign students to work with texts. First, we acknowledge (as do many others) that text complexity is far more nuanced than a Lexile score.² And, in our reading of rigor, there is a toggling back and forth between the text and task challenges for students. At times, a text may have seemingly less complex language but a highly complex theme — so the task pushes for cognitive challenge. At other points, a text may be highly complex, but the task is filled with scaffolding or

centers on lower levels of cognitive thinking. And, there must be a time when both the text and task are complex.

- **Motivation and Engagement** continue to undergird our analysis as we assert that relevancy for students can be a pathway from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex. And, we know that educators must foster autonomy for adolescents, and that this independence occurs when students are given opportunities to collaborate with others and make choices about their learning.

CONTEXT MATTERS!

The fluid nature of this work and our commitment to K-12 practice requires continued sensitivity to the realities of teaching and learning in real classrooms. To be clear, in most classrooms, a single assignment does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it falls within a context or setting of multiple assignments or a unit of study and within a context of teacher-student interactions — all of which are worthy of analysis and consideration. Our framework, however, is *not* designed to encompass all of these contexts.

The framework is designed to isolate the features and characteristics within a single assignment. It can be a powerful tool for analyzing the patterns and trends that exist in an individual classroom or school over several weeks or months. Remember, it is not expected nor recommended that every assignment given to students in a particular class meet *every* indicator on the framework. The questions to ask center on dosage or proportionality:

- How often do students receive assignments that reflect the spirit of the Common Core?
- When and how do students use textual evidence for their claims or arguments?
- What proportion of assignments push for strategic thinking, rigorous discussion, or extended writing?
- When and how often are students given choices in their assignments? How many assignments address rich and challenging content in ways that are relevant for today’s students?

With this in mind, notice that in all assignments we provide *some context* so that you see where an assignment fell within a unit of study or in relationship to other assignments. The context also provides insight for how “low” assignments can be sequenced as stepping stones toward “high” assignments as teachers and students work together to meet the demand of rigorous standards.

GRADE 7 ELA — END OF UNIT WRITING TASK

I Am Malala

by Malala Yousafzai with Patricia McCormick

Over the past five weeks we have thought about and discussed what it means to “make our voices heard” as we read the text, *I Am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai with Patricia McCormick. In this book we learned about Malala and her remarkable life in Pakistan and around the world. During the next two days, you will write a literary analysis about this text.

TASK:

How can we make our voices heard? After reading *I Am Malala*, write a literary essay in which you answer this question. In order to write your essay, select and analyze any one of the following areas:

- a key person from the text
- the setting
- a theme from the text

Support your argument with evidence from the text.

In your piece be sure to:

- Write at least five paragraphs
- Follow the Structure of a Literary Analysis
 - introduction and thesis
 - acknowledgment of an alternative/opposing claim
 - reasons, evidence, and analysis
 - conclusion
- use correct spelling, punctuation, and capitalization

*You may use the text and any of your unit notes or graphic organizers as you plan and write your piece.

Literary Essay Checklist

I introduced the text and author in my opening paragraph.	
I include a thesis statement in my introduction.	
I acknowledge an opposing view in my introduction.	
I include an engaging lead.	
I support my position using reasons and evidence (key details or quotes) from the text.	
My evidence is organized in logical ways; it makes sense.	
I analyze my evidence and connect it back to my thesis.	
I use linking words to connect my opinion with my evidence (because, for example, such as, also, etc.).	
I use specific words/vocabulary that relate to my thesis and the text.	
I use a variety of sentences that will help my readers understand and appreciate my writing.	
My conclusion restates the thesis statement.	
My conclusion will satisfy the reader; it is interesting.	

Editing Checklist

I used a dictionary for words I didn't know how to spell.	
I capitalized the first words in my sentences, dates, holidays, people's names, or specific places/things.	
I used correct punctuation at the end of my sentences.	
I used commas for words in a series and to show a pause in my sentences.	
If I included quotations from the text, I used quotation marks and commas.	
My verbs and subjects agree.	
I used the same verb tense — past or present — for my whole paper.	
I used the correct form for irregular verbs.	
I used complete sentences.	
I have a variety of sentences.	
I used adjectives to describe nouns and adverbs to describe verbs.	

Example 1 Assignment Context

Grade 7 ELA — End of Unit Writing Task

This culminating writing assignment came at the end of a five-week ELA unit, during which students read and analyzed two texts — *The Outsiders* and *I Am Malala* — through the lens of making one’s voice heard. From the onset, students knew of the final writing assignment, which would focus on *I Am Malala*. Thus, all lessons leading up to it were intentionally sequenced and planned.

Students first read *The Outsiders*, focusing on both comprehension of the story itself and on the universal “big idea” of speaking up about one’s ideas and beliefs. Each reading segment was anchored in comprehension strategies that supported these areas. As they moved through the text, students annotated key points, took specific notes, and had moments of both formal and informal discussion. During the writing portion of the unit, students were taught the key features of a literary essay. These features were first modeled and practiced using *The Outsiders*. Students then applied these techniques on their own by writing a literary essay using their independent reading text. The teacher provided feedback and support (through writing conferences).

The final weeks of the unit centered on *I Am Malala*. The reading was completed during class with students focusing on the key points of her life and on the unit’s essential question: How do we make our voices heard? Students also viewed video clips of Malala, which portrayed her story and her subsequent public life. During the final two days of the unit, students were given the assignment presented here. They worked on their own (without teacher support). They were prompted to use everything they had learned and practiced about literary essays throughout the five-week unit. Additionally, they were encouraged to use the text and any notes they had taken.

Summary of Lesson Topics

Reading Lessons	Writing Lessons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehension Strategies for Close Reading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saying what a text means — in your own words • Paying attention to text structure • Asking questions as you read • Addressing key vocabulary • Note-taking strategies (read, think, write) • Using graphic organizers • Thinking within the text • Thinking about a text • Thinking beyond a text • Considering author’s purpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding a summary • Key features of a literary essay • Differences between summary and literary essay • Selecting a topic for a literary essay (character, theme, and setting) • Crafting a strong thesis statement • Organizing reasons that support a thesis • Gathering evidence that support a thesis • Analyzing evidence and connecting to a thesis • Writing a strong introduction • Writing a satisfying conclusion • Editing and conventions (using checklists)

Example 1 Assignment Annotation

Grade 7 ELA — End of Unit Writing Task

This culminating writing assignment falls within the **high range** on the literacy framework (met 6-8 indicators). It comes at the end of a five-week unit during which students read and discussed the text *I Am Malala* through the lens of making one's voice heard.

There are notable strengths in this assignment:

- The task aligns with the Common Core standards for seventh-grade argumentative writing as students are expected to build and support a thesis by analyzing textual evidence. Additionally, they are prompted to acknowledge a counterclaim — a distinguishing expectation in the standards for seventh-grade writers.
- The directions are clear; students know what is expected of them.
- The text is central in this assignment as students are required to select and analyze textual evidence to support their argument.
- In order for students to successfully complete this assignment, they must plan and develop their essay by deciding what their thesis will be, how they will defend or justify it, and how they will sequence their ideas across multiple, cohesive paragraphs. It requires strategic thinking.
- The overarching question of how one makes their voice heard in the world today may resonate for seventh-grade students. This question, coupled with a contemporary nonfiction text focused on a girl of similar age faced with challenges and injustices, may engage students; there is strong potential for students to see the relevancy in these topics and ideas.

A few additional points and questions to consider:

- **Text and Task Complexity:** The Lexile of the text is 830, which falls into the four to five grade band. While it is a straightforward literary nonfiction text, the setting and culture described in it may be unfamiliar for many students who have grown up in the United States. Additionally, the *task* students are asked to do with this text is complex and aligns with grade-level standards.
 - *Question to Consider:* Is it appropriate to use a text worthy of analysis with a lower Lexile score if the assignment demands cognitive challenge for students that is aligned with grade-level standards?
- **Scaffolding:** Within the assignment, there are specific expectations laid out by the teacher. Students are told to write at least five paragraphs and to follow the structure for a literary analysis. (We can infer that this structure was taught to students prior to this assignment.) Additionally, students are cued to include an introduction, reasons, analysis, and a conclusion. They are also prompted to use the text and any notes or graphic organizers they have completed over the past four weeks. Two self-checklists are also provided as part of the assignment.
 - *Question to Consider:* Are the embedded scaffolds a help or a hindrance for seventh-grade students?
- **Motivation and Engagement:** There is limited choice in this assignment. Although all students are expected to base their essay on the text *I Am Malala*, students are allowed to choose how they will frame their analysis (e.g., any key person, the setting, a theme). As mentioned above, there is potential relevancy in the question of making one's voice heard — and the ideas in this text are indeed contemporary and are expressed through the words of a young person.
 - *Question to Consider:* Are there other ways that choice and relevancy could be incorporated into this assignment?

EXAMPLE 2 (LOW RANGE: MET 0-3 FRAMEWORK INDICATORS)

GRADE 8 ELA – ASSIGNMENT A: CLOSE READING – FIRST READ

Work with your partner to closely read the **Introduction** (*Just Imagine*) and **Chapter 1** (*The Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition*). As you read, complete the chapter questions using complete sentences in your reading journal. Due tomorrow. We will use these answers for tomorrow's discussion.

Introduction Questions

1. Where is the Arctic located? Where is the Antarctic located?
2. Describe the Antarctic weather.
3. What important fact about Shackleton does the author reveal in this introduction?

Chapter 1 Questions

1. What important information do you learn about Shackleton on page 2?
2. Who was the first explorer to reach the South Pole?
3. Describe Antarctica.
4. Why was Shackleton a good choice to lead the expedition?
5. How did Shackleton raise money for the trip?
6. Why was the ship named Endurance?
7. What were the Boveril sledging rations?
8. Why was Shackleton concerned about scurvy?
9. What was the original plan for the expedition?

GRADE 8 ELA – ASSIGNMENT B: CLOSE READING – SECOND READ/VOCABULARY WORK

Reread the **Introduction** and **Chapter 1** with an eye for new vocabulary. For each word:

1. Locate the word in the text and try to determine the meaning using text clues. Jot down what it means in your own words.
2. If needed, use your dictionary to define the word. Write a definition in your own words.

Introduction & Chapter 1

- hostile
- mammoth
- treacherous
- expedition
- perilous
- circumnavigation
- improvisation
- stores
- ambled
- predicament
- impractical
- incessant
- impenetrable
- floe
- lead
- obstinate
- stoked
- mirage

Text: *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World: The Extraordinary True Story of Shackleton and the Endurance*
(by Jennifer Armstrong)

Example 2 Assignment Context

Grade 8 ELA — Close Reading Assignments A and B

These assignments — and others that were similar in nature — were given over four weeks as students read *Shipwreck* from beginning to end. Comprehension questions were typically assigned for each chapter coupled with many vocabulary activities. Students were assigned to complete short multiple choice “comprehension checks” (quizzes) and to write sentences using the text’s vocabulary. Short answer questions were also assigned. Other text-related activities included crossword puzzles, matching exercises, making their own sextant, writing a diary entry, and summarizing the story. Additionally, students worked in teams on a survival skills simulation.

Example 2 Assignment Annotation

Grade 8 ELA — Close Reading Assignments A and B

These assignments, which fall into the **low range** on the literacy framework (met 0-3 indicators), are illustrative examples of how close reading is being actualized in some middle school classrooms. These repetitive tasks will likely keep students “busy,” but will not advance their strategic thinking. Despite their low scores, we think these assignments, with intentional adjustments, could meet more indicators or could be paired with high-range assignments.

Consider the following:

- Although the directions are clear in both assignments, their Common Core alignment is weak. The comprehension questions center on basic understanding of facts and details while the vocabulary work appears unnecessarily extensive and somewhat detached from the deeper themes and ideas in the text.
- The text holds a central place in these assignments; however, citing evidence is not required.
- Student thinking is held mostly to recall and reproduction. There are a few places where students need to apply their own ideas (e.g., determining importance, putting definitions into their own words).
- The assignments offer no choices for students nor do they tap real-world relevance.

A few additional points and questions to consider:

- **Alignment to the Common Core:** While it is important for students to initially work through concrete comprehension (e.g., understand the facts, events, and unfamiliar vocabulary), these tasks do not — in and of themselves — reflect the spirit of the Common Core for students in the final stages of their middle school years. Assignments like these can, however, serve as scaffolds toward more rigorous expectations if they maintain focus on what is essential and move students in a timely manner toward broader themes and ideas.
 - *Question to Consider:* How might these assignments be refined to push student thinking beyond basic facts and vocabulary in a timely manner?
- **Text and Task Complexity:** The Lexile of this literary nonfiction text is 1090, which falls into the six to eight and nine to ten grade bands. The setting (the Antarctic Circle in 1914) may be unfamiliar for many students. Additionally, the text is filled with scientific and technical language. At the same time, the text reads as a suspenseful adventure story as the author describes the people and events in rich detail, and each chapter ends with a cliffhanger. It is a well-written, challenging text worthy of analysis. These assignments, however, do not offer cognitive challenge for students. Instead, eighth-grade readers — who are preparing for the demands of high school — are only required to follow the events in each chapter and define the unknown words.
 - *Question to Consider:* How do we effectively sequence our close-reading lessons to ensure both concrete comprehension and higher level thinking?
- **Motivation and Engagement:** The assignments fail to harness the text’s potential to explore big ideas such as leadership, determination, or loyalty. Moreover, there are missed opportunities to delve deeply into science and technology. Finding relevance requires intentional planning; it is a powerful lever for engaging and motivating students.
 - *Questions to Consider:* How might these assignments be refined to engage students around topics such as survival, leadership, or perseverance? How might the assignments connected to this text be anchored in thought-provoking questions that resonate with young adolescents? For example: What does it mean to lead? How is leadership challenging? How do we make big decisions?

GRADE 7 AMERICAN HISTORY – CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION DEBATES

The day has arrived for our Constitutional Convention! Be sure to have your biography and the *Three Critical Issues* document available to you as you will need to reference these materials throughout the debate.

The Convention will be split into three separate debates, each involving one of the Critical Issues. Each debate will follow the procedure outlined below:

1. The first five minutes of the debate will be a **Speakers List** debate, during which you must raise your placard and be called on in order to speak.
 - You may not speak out of turn!
 - The purpose of this session is to state your opinion on the Critical Issue and recognize delegates who may be your ally.
2. The Speakers List debate will be followed by three minutes of **Unmoderated Debate and Resolution Writing**, during which you may approach delegates you feel will agree with your stance on the Critical Issue and draft solutions to the Critical Issue.
3. Finally, we will enter three to five minutes of **Resolution Debate**, during which delegates will put forth their resolutions.

The last step of each debate will be to vote on the resolutions. The resolution that receives the majority of the vote will be the one selected to enter into our "Constitution."

Example 3 Assignment Context

Grade 7 American History — Constitutional Convention Debates

Driving Question:

How can we effectively address the issues facing our nation and create a stronger governing document?

Task:

The year is 1787. Just a few years after the signing of the Treaty of Paris. The newly created United States is teetering on the edge of collapse. The Articles of Confederation, the first attempt to organize this new country, has proven to be too weak and filled with flaws to properly hold this young nation together. It is tearing apart at the seams.

In this project, you and your classmates will recreate the Constitutional Convention of 1787. You will take on the personalities of the men who were called to save this great country from ruin, and you will discuss and debate the very same issues that were being discussed in a cramped room in Philadelphia.

The goal of this simulation is to faithfully represent your historical figure and enter into debate with your fellow classmates over three critical issues facing the young United States — states' rights vs. national authority, representation, and slavery. You will work for compromise on those issues and draft solutions. Once all three issues have been solved in the simulation, we will contrast and compare how the *real* Convention debated and solved those issues. This will provide us with a deeper understanding of the mountain our 'Founding Fathers' had to climb in order to establish a republic that would last for all time.

Procedure:

Step #1

Biographical Essay on Historical Figure: The first assignment will be a 1.5- to 2-page (double-spaced) biography of your historical figure.

Step #2

Critical Issues Questionnaire: Once you have completed the biography, use the information to answer the 'Critical Issues Questionnaire' based on how **your historical figure would have answered them**.

Step #3

Convention Simulation (*This assignment is annotated on pg. 13.*): Finally, once all the preparation work has been completed, we will begin the simulation. You will be expected to faithfully represent your historical figure in each debate, which means you must be fully prepared and confident in your figure's position on the three critical issues.

Step #4

Reflection: After we complete the Convention Simulation, we will return to our text and learn about how the delegates actually dealt with the three critical issues in 1787.

Example 3 Assignment Annotation

Grade 7 American History — Constitutional Convention Debates

This discussion assignment falls within the **high range** on the literacy framework (met six to eight indicators). It comes at the end of a two-week unit, during which students researched a Founding Father through reading and extended writing. Additionally, students determined how their Founding Father would respond to three critical issues that existed in the United States in 1787.

There are notable strengths in this discussion assignment:

- The task aligns with the Common Core standards for seventh-grade speaking and listening as students are expected to:
 - prepare for this debate by reading and researching
 - use their research and their “Critical Issues” questionnaire as evidence for their claims
 - follow specific rules and procedures during the discussion
 - consider the ideas and claims of others, adjusting their own position as needed in order to reach compromise
 - present their knowledge and ideas succinctly and respectfully — in accordance with the delineated time limits and rules of engagement
- The directions are clear. Students know what is expected of them.
- Texts are central in this assignment as students are expected to bring their own text-based research and writing to the simulation and to use these texts as evidence for their claims and points.
- In order for students to successfully participate in this discussion, they had to complete several assignments ahead of time. Earlier tasks required them to plan and develop a one- to two-page biographical essay that included a thesis, supporting evidence, and analysis written across multiple, cohesive paragraphs. They also had to use their research to inform their ideas around three critical issues facing the United States in 1787. Strategic thinking was required in multiple instances.
- Students chose the Founding Father they would represent. Additionally, the debate was nested within a series of assignments anchored in an essential question. This question, coupled with the teacher’s engaging introduction may spark an interest with young adolescents; there is strong potential for students to see the relevancy in these topics and ideas.

A few additional points and questions to consider:

- **Discussion:** This assignment highlights how discussion can align with the rigor of the Common Core. Students spent significant time preparing for and engaging in this rich, structured conversation around important historical content. The thoughtful framing of the discussion required students to know and understand their topic well and to listen attentively to the ideas presented by others. Through this speaking and listening, students deepened and widened their comprehension of the content while simultaneously solidifying their argumentation skills. Interestingly, this discussion assignment came after students read and wrote extensively about their Founding Father and before a reflective assignment that would require students to read and write again. It is a powerful example of the cyclical relationship between reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
 - *Question to Consider:* When and how do we include time for extended, formal discussion? How can we intentionally connect reading, writing, and discussion?
- **Scaffolding:** Within this assignment, and in the assignments leading up to the simulation, there are many, specific expectations laid out by the teacher. Students are given detailed guidance on how to take notes, outline, and lay out their five-paragraph biographical essay. Additionally, several graphic organizers and student samples are provided for them. The details of the Convention simulation are also explicitly laid out.
 - *Question to Consider:* Are the embedded scaffolds a help or a hindrance for seventh-grade students? When and how do we use scaffolding in our assignments?

GRADE 8 HISTORY – SOCRATIC SEMINAR “#BLACKLIVESMATTER - OR - #ALLLIVESMATTER?”

You will be holding an active discourse among yourselves to arrive at possible answers to the **Essential Questions** mapped out below.

1. **“All Lives Matter”**: **What** does the quote mean to you? **Do** you **agree** or **disagree** with the quote and **why**?
2. **Why** do you think some people have said “All Lives Matter” in response to “Black Lives Matter?” How does this impact the Black Lives Matter movement? **Is** one of the terms more appropriate than the other? Explain.
3. **Whose** quote was the most eye-opening and **why**? **Whose** do you agree with the most and **why**? **Disagree** with the most and why? (Refer to the “All Lives Matter” quotation Doc by [clicking here.](#))
4. **What** would ... Booker T. Washington/W.E.B. Du Bois/Martin Luther King Jr./ Malcolm X/Marcus Garvey say about this issue?
5. **Given** all of the racially fueled incidents that sparked the #BlackLivesMatter movement, **whose** strategy for achieving racial equality and harmony would be the most applicable in 2015 and **why**? [**Utilize** your notes/knowledge from the “Assessing Strategies of Civil Rights Leaders” presentations.]
6. **How** can we, as members of the school community, help to raise more awareness about such a controversial, yet relevant, topic such as this?
7. **WHAT IF** ... these police-related shootings had been carried out by members of the **same** race (i.e., a white police officer shooting a white suspect; a minority police officer shooting another minority, etc.)? **IS** “race” the only contributing factor to these police-related shootings? **Justify/Explain.**

Socratic Seminar Guideline

- **Develop** a plan that will work for everybody (or the majority of students) to contribute at least **three** times.
- **Remember**, this is an **active discourse**, **NOT** a debate. You are trying to have your stance on these questions heard, but also hear and try to understand/appreciate the opinions of others on the same topic(s).
- **You do NOT** need to answer questions in the order that they appear — this is up to the group! Similarly, you may not even get to answer all seven Essential Questions — the flow of the seminar is truly dictated by the participation and ideas that each student brings to the table.
- Develop responses to the Essential Questions listed above — “unpack” the significant content needed to best support your stance on any of the questions.
- Avoid side conversations — you could lose points this way.
- Let a minimum of **TWO** others speak before you speak again.
- The seminar does not need to be or stay focused solely around the Essential Questions. Other questions and topics related to the overall theme are encouraged — as long as they are relevant and do not detract from the overall flow of the Socratic Seminar.
- Responses to others’ comments should always be respectful even if you disagree with or question what was said.

Example 4 Assignment Context

Grade 8 History — Socratic Seminar

Pre-Seminar Preparation Work (Homework):

- **Read:** “How Black Lives Matter moved from a hashtag to a real political force” by clicking this link.
- **Answer** the following questions in preparation for our next Socratic Seminar:
 1. **What** are 2-3 things you learned about the Black Lives Matter movement that you didn’t previously know?
 2. **Based** on the article, how has the Black Lives Matter movement changed and evolved since its beginning?
 3. **What** are some of the challenges and disagreements within the Black Lives Matter movement?
 4. In **what** ways has the movement been injected into the 2016 presidential campaign?
 5. **What** are some of the accomplishments of the Black Lives Matter movement?
- **Read and Analyze** quotes about “All Lives Matter” by clicking here.
 - **Whose** quote is the most eye-opening and **why**?
 - **Whose** do you agree with the most? **Disagree** with the most?

Post-Seminar Written Assignment (Homework):

Based on everything that was discussed during today’s Socratic Seminar, reflect on your own thinking about the Black Lives Matter movement. You should respond to the following statement:

“Personally, I (agree or disagree) with the #BlackLivesMatter awareness campaign because ...

Your response should include at least 2-3 specific details of support stemming from the relevant readings and your experience in today’s Socratic Seminar.

Example 4 Assignment Annotation

Grade 8 History — Socratic Seminar

This assignment falls within the **high range** on the literacy framework (met 6-8 indicators). It comes at the end of a four-week civil rights unit. Students were required to prepare for this assignment by reading and analyzing two texts and by viewing a video of Hillary Clinton meeting with leaders from the Black Lives Matter movement. As a follow-up, students were required to write a personal essay using evidence from the texts and the Socratic Seminar.

There are notable strengths in this assignment:

- The task aligns with the Common Core standards for eighth-grade speaking and listening as students are expected to:
 - prepare for the discussion by reading and analyzing texts, note-taking
 - use their notes as evidence for their discussion points
 - follow specific rules and procedures during the discussion
 - consider the ideas and claims of others, adjusting their own position as needed
 - present their knowledge and ideas succinctly and respectfully — in accordance with the seminar’s guidelines
- The directions are clear. Students know what is expected of them.

Example 4 Assignment Annotation Continued ...

Grade 8 History — Socratic Seminar

- Texts are central in this assignment as students are expected to read multiple texts prior to the discussion and to use these texts as evidence for their claims and points.
- Students used their prior reading and note-taking to inform their responses to the essential questions. Extended writing (personal essay) was a direct follow-up that included a thesis, supporting evidence, and reasoning. Strategic thinking was required in multiple instances.
- The discussion topic is relevant and timely. There is both choice and support for student autonomy in this assignment as the Essential Questions have been laid out in a *skeletal* way; there is room for students to shape the discussion in their own, unique way.

A few additional points and questions to consider:

- **Motivation and Engagement:** Many young adolescents will connect to the seminar's topic given its prominence in the news and across social media outlets. Additionally, such issues as racial equity and justice, fairness, authority, and power structures may resonate for young adolescents. In some classrooms, this current event discussion might have occurred as a standalone event. However, this teacher seized the moment to place the discussion at the end of a unit of study on civil rights that analyzed a range of historical topics, including the Jim Crow South, the Freedom Riders, the death of Emmett Till, and the different strategies employed by some civil rights leaders (e.g., Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X). This placement bridged the known with the unknown as students made connections between the present and the past. It afforded them an opportunity to more deeply understand the historical significance of the Black Lives Matter movement.
 - *Questions to Consider:* How do we design assignments that tap "big ideas" and themes — that speak across cultures and generations? How can we use these "big ideas" and themes to connect our students with new or unfamiliar content?
- **Discussion:** Similar to the seventh-grade history example, this assignment highlights how discussion can align with the rigor of the Common Core. This thoughtful framing fostered deeper understanding of a complex issue and pushed students to think critically about it as they practiced their argumentation skills. Notice again that this discussion assignment came *after* students read and took notes and *before* a reflective assignment that would require them to write a personal essay using evidence and reasoning. It is another strong example of the cyclical relationship between reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
 - *Question to Consider:* As we develop and implement multi-week units of study, when and how do we include opportunities for formal discussion?
- **Text and Task Complexity:** The texts in this assignment are relatively short but do fall within the Lexile band recommended for eighth grade. That said, as noted above, many students will be motivated and engaged in this assignment. Thus, this is an optimum time to push for rigor through the use of extended, complex texts. Students will deepen their understanding of this topic's historical significance if they have had an opportunity to closely read primary and secondary sources written by and about a diverse set of civil rights leaders — both male and female. Though complex texts do pose challenges, the motivation to read them — given the context of this assignment — will support comprehension.

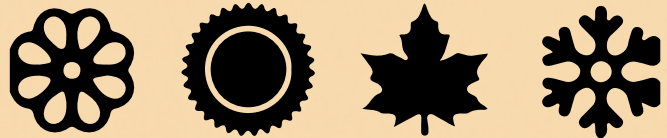
GRADE 6 SCIENCE — SEASONS WRITING PROMPT

WHY ARE THERE SEASONS?

Our city experiences drastic changes in temperature over the course of a year. In the winter, the average temperature in our city is around 36° F. In the summer, it increases to 82° F. Using the data tables below as well as the data that you have collected in class, write a paper explaining why there are seasons.

Distance Between the Sun and Earth

Date	Earth's Distance From the Sun (km)
January 3	147,000,000
July 4	152,000,000



Hours of Daylight by Month

Date	Hours of Daylight in Our City
January 21	9 h 36 min
February 21	10 h 51 min
March 21	12 h 13 min
April 21	13 h 40 min
May 21	14 h 50 min
June 21	15 h 17 min
July 21	14 h 48 min
August 21	13 h 37 min
September 21	12 h 11 min
October 21	10 h 47 min
November 21	9 h 34 min
December 21	9 h 5 min

Solar Angle by Month (90° Would be Directly Overhead)

Date	Angle of Sun in the Sky
January 21	27.7°
February 21	37.1°
March 21	48.2°
April 21	59.8°
May 21	68.0°
June 21	71.1°
July 21	67.9°
August 21	56.0°
September 21	48.0°
October 21	36.7°
November 21	27.6°
December 21	24.2°

DON'T FORGET TO ...

- Plan your writing using an outline, web, or graphic organizer. As you write each draft of your assignment, it's important to use what you know as a writer to communicate your ideas effectively.
- Provide a clear claim that answers the question.
- Include evidence — using data from class activities, experiments, and other resources.
- Include reasoning to show how your evidence supports your claim.
- Use vocabulary that you have learned in science class.
- Check for grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors.

EXAMPLE 6 (HIGH RANGE: MET 6-8 FRAMEWORK INDICATORS)

GRADE 7 SCIENCE — FLOWER STRUCTURES WRITING PROMPT

Standard: Explain, based on evidence, how characteristic animal behaviors as well as specialized plant structures increase the probability of successful reproduction of animals and plants, respectively.

Prompt:

Ah'mani and Wydri walked past a flower garden on their way home. Ah'mani said, "Flowers are so stupid. Their only purpose is to look pretty and smell funny."

Wydri stopped and said, "I think they are really important for plants to survive."

What is the primary function (purpose) of flowers?

Remember to include:

- Claim: Answer the question.
- Evidence: Use data and observations from your flower dissection lab to support your claim.
- Reasoning: Use information from readings or notes to explain why your evidence supports your claim.

Examples 5 and 6 Assignment Context

Grade 6 and 7 Science — Seasons and Flower Structures Writing Prompts

Context	Grade 6	Grade 7
<i>Overarching Unit</i>	Weather and Water	Diversity of Life
<i>What themes and big ideas were embedded in this unit?</i>	Weather and factors that affect it; air pressure; weather patterns; seasons; radiation, conduction, and heat transfer; density	Characteristics of life; cell as basic unit of life; cell parts and functions; plant structures and development; animal investigation
<i>When did the assignment occur in the unit?</i>	This assignment took place during week seven of a 10-week unit.	This assignment took place at the end of this 10-week unit.
<i>What topics were studied in this unit?</i>	Students took part in <u>eight</u> different investigations prior to this assignment that addressed the following topics: <i>definition of weather, understanding air, the seasons and the sun, heat transfer, convection, water in the air, the water cycle and its relationship to the Earth, and air pressure and wind.</i>	Students took part in <u>seven</u> different investigations prior to this assignment that addressed the following topics: <i>definition of life, an introduction to the microscope, microscopic life, cell structure and functions, seeds, transpiration, and plant reproduction.</i>
<i>What other tasks and assignments did students complete during this unit?</i>	Within these investigations, students were expected to engage in scientific thinking by reading a wide range of texts, note-taking, researching, discussing, collecting and observing data, and designing their own experiments. Students kept interactive science notebooks throughout this 10-week unit that held their written notes, sketches, data, etc. They were encouraged to use their notebooks for this assignment.	
<i>What writing supports were students given for the claims, evidence, and reasoning (CER) prompts?</i>	Students were prompted to follow a claims, evidence, and reasoning structure. They were provided a range of graphic organizers to use (see Graphic Organizers on page 21), but were also given permission to plan for their writing in their own way (e.g., through sketching, brainstorming ideas, or creating their own graphic organizer).	

Sample of Graphic Organizers Provided for the Argumentation (CER) Prompts in Grades 6 and 7

Question: _____

Claim:

Evidence 1:

Evidence 2:

Evidence 3:

Reasoning 1:

Reasoning 2:

Reasoning 3:

Question: _____

Claim:

Evidence 1:

Evidence 2:

Evidence 3:

Reasoning:

Matches Evidence # __

Reasoning:

Matches Evidence # __

Reasoning:

Matches Evidence # __

Question: _____

Claim:

Evidence:

Reasoning:

Examples 5 and 6 Assignment Annotation

Grade 6 and 7 Science — Seasons and Flower Structures Writing Prompts

These science assignments fall within the **high** range on the literacy framework (met 6-8 indicators). They came at intentional points within a 10-week unit comprising multiple investigations. As noted above, prior to these written prompts, students engaged in scientific thinking by reading a wide range of texts, taking notes, researching, discussing, collecting and observing data, and designing their own experiments. Students kept interactive science notebooks throughout the units and were encouraged to use them for these assignments.

There are notable strengths in these assignments:

- The CER prompts align with the Common Core standards for grades six to eight writing in science as students are expected to:
 - include a claim about the topic
 - use data and observations to support their claim
 - use reasoning based on their readings and notes to explain why their evidence supports their claim
 - adhere to grades six to eight science writing expectations (coherence, organization, clarity, and conventions)

Examples 5 and 6 Assignment Annotation Continued ...

Grade 6 and 7 Science — Seasons and Flower Structures Writing Prompts

- The directions are clear. Students know what is expected of them.
- Texts are central in these assignments as students are expected to use their readings and notes as evidence for their claims and points; texts include traditional written texts (e.g., articles, textbook excerpts), visual texts, datasets, lab notes and findings, graphs and/or diagrams.
- Extended writing — aligned with strategic thinking — is required as students are expected to make a claim and support it with relevant and accurate evidence coupled with logical reasons. Students are expected to:
 - organize their writing into paragraphs
 - use transition words
 - provide a conclusion statement or section
 - write with clarity and employ a formal style
 - demonstrate command of grammar and mechanics
 - use multiple sources, avoid plagiarism, and cite sources in a standard format
- Students are given freedom to develop their own approach to the CER structure; six graphic organizers are available that support these choices for their planning. Relevancy is present as prompts tap topics that exist in students' real world (e.g., the purpose of flowers, their city's annual temperatures).

A few additional points and questions to consider:

- **Alignment to the Common Core:** These assignments highlight how the Common Core envisions science and literacy intersecting. Notice that these prompts represent a *small slice* of what students did over a 10-week period. It is neither expected nor recommended that writing in science replace or supplant the rich and rigorous science content students need and deserve. At the same time, pairing science content with writing tasks such as these only serves to deepen student thinking and solidify scientific comprehension.
 - *Question to Consider:* When and how do we include time for extended writing in science?
- **Discussion:** Student talk does not appear in these assignments. Informal discussion did appear in the unit plans as students worked with peers during experiments and demonstrations; but there was no evidence of extended, formal discussion or debate assignments.
 - *Questions to Consider:* When and how do we include time for formal discussion or debate in science? How might discussion support students as they prepare for CER prompts?
- **Scaffolding:** Within these assignments there are moments of support and moments for student independence. In both grades, students are cued to use the CER framework, their notes, and any relevant data to answer the prompt. In grade six, notice that students are also cued to employ the conventions of good writing and are encouraged to plan for their CER response by making an outline, using a graphic organizer, or designing a web. In grade seven, this scaffolding no longer is present. Instead, students have been given the independence to take on these responsibilities themselves.
 - *Questions to Consider:* When is scaffolding important for students? When and how should it be limited/removed in assignments?

NOTES

1. Low-range assignments met 0-2 indicators. Mid-range assignments met 3-5 indicators. High-range assignments met 6-8 indicators.
2. The Lexile Framework for Reading is an educational tool used to measure readers and the complexity of a text. A text receives a Lexile score based on an analysis of its quantitative features such as frequency of words and length of sentences. Detailed information on the Lexile Framework for Reading can be found at <https://lexile.com/>.

ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels — pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas.

Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people — especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families — to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.



ABOUT THIS SERIES

In this series, we will take a close look at how issues of equity are playing out in the daily activities of schools and educators. We aim to advance the work of practitioners and connect district, state, and federal actions aimed at improving education for low-income students with meaningful teaching and learning in schools. This follow-up report examines middle school classroom assignments to determine how well we are implementing more rigorous standards for college and career readiness. Future work in this series will expand on findings from more schools and introduce tools and processes for educators to use as they work to implement high-level standards. Most important, however, work in this series will continue to ask how we can adjust our practices, systems, and policies so that low-income students and students of color are actually benefitting from these efforts.



The Education Trust