# Twelve Assignments Every Middle School Student Should Write

Plus Prompts for Daily Writing
&
Guide for Surviving the Research Paper

Gary Chadwell

*Twelve Assignments Every Middle School Student Should Write* is a revised and expanded version of *Middle School Writing Projects: Ideas for Writing Across the Curriculum* originally published in 1996.



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ISBN: 978–0–9822965–1–6

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 ITP: 5,000

August 2009

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# Foreword

In my book, *The Collins Writing Program: Improving Student Performance Through Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum*, I introduced ideas that make writing instruction more focused and manageable for teachers in all content areas. Along with a rationale and research base for the program, I included many specific prompts and writing assignments. This book, by my colleague Gary Chadwell, is meant to complement and extend those suggestions by putting a specific focus on the needs of middle school students and their teachers.

*Twelve Assignments Every Middle School Student Should Write* is a revision and expansion of Gary's earlier book, *Middle School Writing Projects: Ideas for Writing Across the Curriculum*. With this book, Gary has offered a roadmap for both using writing and teaching writing in the middle school. In Chapter 1, he has suggested a wealth of Type One and Type Two Writing prompts that are organized by different disciplines and levels of Bloom's *Revised Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.*

In Chapters Three and Four he has laid out a series of rich and challenging Type Four writing assignments. As I did in *The Collins Writing Program: Improving Student Performance*, he has categorized these assignments as Essential and Highly Recommended. The four Essential assignments here parallel those in my book, though they have been tailored specifically to the needs of middle school writers. The eight Highly Recommended assignments offer a set of unique and highly valuable assignments that will benefit middle school students in all content areas. A special emphasis is placed on the kind of assignments that are often required on state assessments—including personal essays and persuasive writing.

Chapter Five details strategies for making the experience of writing a research paper more manageable—and enjoyable—for students and teachers alike. By adapting the segmented approach from one of my earlier books, *A Survivor's Guide to the Research Paper*, Gary offers assignments and resources aimed specifically at the needs of middle school writers. This approach has a nearly two decade history of success in helping students with the challenge of writing a research paper.

This book is accompanied by electronic files of reproducible pages of the book. These files allow you to reproduce the assignments and graphic organizers, to download and use them in your classroom, and to customize them for your specific classroom needs. All reproducible pages available on the CD are designated with this icon: 

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# Introduction

For years writing across the curriculum has been a topic of discussion and often the subject of inservice sessions. Yet for most schools, infusing more writing into content areas was more of a worthy goal than a schoolwide priority. Today, however, writing across the curriculum has become a priority and a high-stakes enterprise because of the increased emphasis given writing by statewide assessment programs. These assessment programs are causing educators across the country to reassess their approach to teaching and using writing.

Today, virtually every state uses student writing as part of its assessment program. Most states use the assessment for the primary purpose of improving instruction, but the assessment programs are used for other reasons, too. They are used for school accreditation, high school graduation, endorsed diplomas, teacher evaluation, and, in some cases, state funding.

The burden for preparing students for these assessments should not fall to English teachers alone. Most of the statewide assessment programs now require constructed responses (brief explanations of reasoning or support for an answer) in social studies, mathematics, and science. The implication for educators is clear: Use writing in your coursework because students who are not comfortable writing about their content learning will be ill-prepared for the challenges they face on the tests.

This point was underscored for me by a district science curriculum coordinator whom I have worked with closely for several years. The coordinator was working with his state's pilot of its new science assessment program. In that assessment, twenty percent of the test involved constructed response questions. The pilot coordinators were alarmed by the number of students who simply skipped the constructed response questions. These same students answered the multiple choice questions, but when they were asked to explain answers, critique scientific investigations, or describe steps in a process they opted to not even try. My friend held the same theory as I did about why so many students were reluctant to answer the constructed responses: They were intimidated by the task. These questions required only a few sentences to answer—not a full-blown essay. But because they were unaccustomed to writing about science concepts, the questions seemed daunting.

The surest way to help students overcome their discomfort with writing—in any content area—is to have them write on a regular basis about their learning. This book offers practical and manageable ways for you to infuse more writing into coursework and help your students become more fluent with their writing. The specific ideas contained here are inspired by the strategies described by Dr. John Collins in his book, *The Collins Writing Program: Improving Student Performance Through Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum.* I have written this book as a companion piece to Collins's book; I offer it as a ready-to-use, daily resource for middle school teachers using the Collins Writing Program.

The ideas and strategies I describe are designed for use by middle school teachers in all content areas. The first chapter, "Writing to Learn—Developing Fluency and Increasing Academic Engagement," suggests a broad range of prompts and thought-provoking questions that not only help teachers teach but also help students become comfortable with getting their ideas into writing. The second chapter, "Learning to Write—An Introduction to Key Writing Assignments," serves as an introduction to what the book title promises—assignments that every middle school student should be doing. The final three chapters describe more formal writing assignments for students that provide an opportunity to develop and sharpen specific thinking and writing skills.

In the early years of the No Child Left Behind era of testing and accountability, eighth grade was typically a target grade for much of the assessment. Some educators mistakenly saw this as a special burden of test preparation for the unlucky eighth-grade teachers. Now, however, the statewide assessments have been spread over more grades and disciplines so that few teachers can realistically feel they are not key players in preparing their students for the high-stakes assessments.

All middle school teachers, in all disciplines, must be involved in preparing students to think and write. We must change the culture of our classrooms so that writing is an integral part of the teaching and learning process in all subject areas.

But don't mistake this book for a test-preparation guide. The strategies and ideas here go well beyond preparing middle school students for writing assessments. They are consistent with the most frequent recommendations being made today for effective teaching. Over the last few years, there has evolved a growing consensus of state-of-the-art practices—best practices—in each curriculum area. These practices are recommended by professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Writing Project, the National Council for the Social Studies, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the National Council of Teachers of English.

Many of the strategies I suggest are identified and discussed in the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development's *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* (2001). In that book, Robert Marzano and colleagues have identified nine categories of strategies "that have a high probability of enhancing student achievement for all students in all subject areas at all grade levels" (p. 7).

The best practices I describe are not *promising* approaches to instruction; they are *proven* practices, shown to be effective over time and in a variety of applications. Rather than having to rely on the results of individual research studies, which sometimes can be contradictory or confusing, educators today can benefit from large-scale meta-analyses. These studies, which examine trends within a body of related research projects, identify practices that most consistently have a positive effect on student achievement. In 2007, the Carnegie Corporation issued findings from its meta-analysis on writing instruction. The report, *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (2007), identifies the eleven elements of writing instruction "found to be effective for helping adolescent students learn to write well and to use writing as a tool for learning" (p. 4). The Collins Writing Program is remarkably consistent with the findings in this important study (see our website www.collinsed.com for a summary of the findings and the connections to our program). The suggestions offered here are intended to translate the research from the Carnegie study and from the "what works" literature into everyday practice for middle-level grades.

Writing can be, and should be, an important element of instruction aimed at encouraging students to be more engaged, productive, and thoughtful in their learning. In the chapters that follow, specific prompts and writing assignments are provided that you can use daily to make writing a part of the learning culture in your classrooms.

## Seven Elements of a Great Writing Project

**Project Summary:** These are a few sentences describing the assignment in a nutshell. In other words, the summary gives a sense of what the project involves. The summary should include a *rationale* for the project (how this parallels writing and thinking done outside the classroom), a *context* for the assignment (what learning or reading experience this is connected to), and what the final *product* will be (letter, dialogue, story, set of instructions, and so on).

**Writer's Purpose:** The purpose element clarifies for students whether they are explaining, persuading, entertaining, or informing. It is important for writers to be clear about their writing goal since different thinking strategies or approaches are deployed to accomplish different aims.

**Writer's Role:** Most writing in the classroom is done from the students' own perspective, but that need not always be the case. Asking students to write from alternative perspectives—such as from the viewpoint of a character in a story, of an historical figure, or a tutor or expert from a specialized field—can stretch their thinking and extend their learning. When writers think of their role, they answer the question, "From whose perspective am I writing?"

**Audience:** In the same way that purpose helps guide thinking about writing, so does audience. Writers communicate ideas more easily when they have a specific audience in mind. Knowing the intended audience (an author, a classmate, parents, a younger student, or a local business) helps the writer make decisions about the writing. The writer can then choose the tone and language most appropriate for the audience.

**Form:** This element clarifies what the final product will be: a letter, summary, critique, essay, laboratory report, set of directions, or some other form.

**Focus Correction Areas:** These are aspects of writing—such as clear thesis, correct punctuation for dialogue, or sentence variety—given special attention and specific accountability. They let your students know what you want them to "spotlight" in their writing. To be most effective, your focus correction areas should be limited to no more than three and should include a mix of content, organization, style, and mechanical criteria.

**Procedure:** These steps outline for students the prewriting activities and other steps to be taken to complete the task. An important part of the project plan, these steps should be designed and segmented to lead students to success with the assignment.

My hope is that the projects in this book, each done in the seven element format, will serve as a model for others you will develop yourself. Thinking through a writing assignment you want your students to do, writing it down in a structured format, and talking about it with your students will make a difference in the quality of the compositions they give you.

One of the major products of the writing institutes I conduct with middle school teachers is the creation of seven-element assignments in the style of those shown here. I work closely with teachers as they wrestle with questions about audience and purpose and as they mull over various forms they might use and perspectives from which their students might write. They think hard about the procedures they can plan that will help students succeed with the task. It takes thoughtful planning to fit all the pieces together, but the results make it well worth the effort.

Teachers consistently tell me they are pleased with the results of their seven-element assignments. They feel that they communicate expectations more clearly and that their teaching is more focused. Not surprisingly, they find that student writing is more focused and effective.

## Why These Assignments Are Important

I meet with hundreds of teachers each year and work in countless classrooms. No one knows better than I that there are many effective ways to accomplish similar goals; I see evidence of that every day. So why these twelve writing assignments? The most succinct way of answering that is to say these projects meet several essential criteria: They are used successfully by a wide variety of teachers; they can be used or readily adapted for multiple content areas and for a variety of student needs; and they have a positive impact on students' writing skills and future learning.

In his book, *The Collins Writing Program: Improving Student Performance,* John Collins makes a compelling case for why some writing experiences are more important than others. The recommended assignments here are consistent with John's suggestions. Let me briefly explain why *every* middle school student should be doing these compositions.

*They Emphasize Critical Writing and Thinking Skills.* Problems with grammar and mechanics are the easiest weaknesses to notice in student writing, but they are not the most important. Writing assessments at all levels—district, state, and national—point to shortcomings in organization and elaboration as being the most common

weaknesses. So it is not just the rule-based aspects of writing that we must help students improve. It is the thinking aspects of writing—how to organize thoughts, elaborate ideas, and write with voice—that we must focus on improving. The dozen writing assignments here emphasize essential writing and thinking skills students need to become proficient writers. They also reflect the best practice literature on the kind of skills and habits of mind that our students will need for future learning, both in school and beyond.

*They Provide Teaching and Modeling Opportunities*. The strategies that work in most all teaching situations—modeling, demonstrating, coaching, practicing—also work well in writing. The twelve assignments that follow are not just suggested topics. They offer pathways to lead your students to success. Many include Focus Sheets and graphic organizers that make the abstract thinking processes that effective writers use more concrete for your students. Using graphic organizers like these helps students visualize and internalize thinking processes. Some assignments also have Tip Sheets that offer strategies, guidelines, and rules-of-thumb for middle school writers.

*They Have Authenticity*. Authentic writing is done for real audiences, for real purposes, and in real-world formats such as letters, directions, or recommendations. Writing assignments that have authenticity are easier for students because their knowledge of things like audience and purpose makes it easier to make decisions about the ways of going about the writing.

*They Are Flexible and Easily Modified*. The following projects are designed so that they can be adapted for different content and writing levels. I also encourage you to repeat some of the projects multiple times so that your students get opportunities to practice genre-specific skills and strategies. For example, it is unlikely that a student who is unskilled in persuasive writing is going to make significant progress with one persuasive writing experience—no matter how well-designed the writing experience is. I hope these projects will serve as springboards to other, similar projects.

*They Provide Structure and Clarity*. Let's be honest. As teachers, we have all given students assignments that, in retrospect, were not well thought-out or clear. My guess is your experience is the same as mine: Fuzzy assignments usually yield fuzzy student writing. The assignments in this book reflect a key tenant of the Collins Writing Program: Be as clear and transparent as possible with students about writing expectations.

By using the seven element format of these assignments, you provide students with a tangible guide to their assignment. The assignment is written, not oral. Therefore, it simultaneously decreases the chances of the assignment being misinterpreted and

increases the chances that students will follow through in the way you expect. As John C. Bean in his book *Engaging Ideas* (2001) says, providing students with a handout that explains a writing assignment has the advantage of giving "all students something to refer to late at night when their class notes no longer seem so clear" (p. 84).

My hope is that on any major assignment you are giving your students you would present it to them in the seven element format. As you think through the seven elements, you will find that your assignment will be clearer, more focused. And the clearer your students are on your expectations, the more likely they are to meet your expectations. On pages 22 and 23 I provide a template you can use to design your own assignments.

# Overview of Assignments

| ASSIGNMENTS | LANGUAGE ARTS | MATH | SCIENCE | SOCIAL STUDIES | SPECIAL SUBJECTS | TIMING |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Essential Assignments (Chapter 3)* | | | | | | |
| The Ten Percent Summary (*Summarizing*) | X | X | X | X | X | Fall and Anytime |
| Personal Vocabulary Cards (*Developing Vocabulary*) | X | X | X | X | X | Fall |
| Comparing and Contrasting to Clarify a Misunderstanding (*Comparing and Contrasting*) | X | X | X | X | X | Mid-year |
| Taking a Stand (*Persuading*) | X | X | X | X | ≈ | Mid-year |
| *Highly Recommended Assignments (Chapter 4)* | | | | | | |
| Writing a Personal Essay (*Informing*) | X | ≈ | ≈ | ≈ | ≈ | Early Fall |
| Summarizing Important Information (*Summarizing*) | X | X | X | X | X | Anytime |
| Advice from a Middle School Expert: A How-To Guide (*Explaining*) | X | X | X | X | X | Mid-year |
| Collecting and Interpreting Data (*Analyzing*) | X | X | X | X | ≈ | Anytime |
| Describing a Special Place (*Describing and Informing*) | X | ≈ | ≈ | ≈ | X | Anytime |
| News with a View (*Informing and Persuading*) | X | X | X | X | X | Spring |
| Creating a Multimedia Presentation (*Informing*) | X | ≈ | X | X | X | Anytime |
| Presenting a Mini-Portfolio to Next Year's Teacher (*Analyzing and Explaining*) | X | X | X | X | X | Spring |
| *Interconnected Assignments (Chapter 5)* | | | | | | |
| The Guided Research Paper (*Informing and Persuading*) | X | ≈ | X | X | ≈ | Mid-year or Spring |

X Assignment requires little or no modification ≈ Requires some shift in focus

## The Ten Percent Summary

*Notes to the Teacher*

Of all the assignments in this book, this one might have the most far-reaching effect on your students' future learning. Summarizing should be part of every student's skill set, but it's not an intuitive skill for many students. It has to be developed, practiced, and refined. This writing project, along with your variations and some of the supportive activities suggested below, can go a long way toward improving this vital skill.

*Assignment Rationale:* Summarizing has long been held as a highly prized academic skill. Recent, influential meta-analyses, like those described in *Writing Next* (Graham and Perin, 2007) and *Classroom Instruction That Works* (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock, 2001), place summarizing near the top of their lists of best practices. It is easy to understand why summarizing is important in an academic setting. Students who can synthesize and distill information, who can distinguish important ideas from merely interesting ones, and who can find the gist of a text passage have a big advantage over those who cannot.

Summarizing is also an essential life skill. Think of all the times in everyday life we use summarizing skills: recapping a day, telling about a vacation, giving the highlights of a meeting or an important email, providing the major points of a decision-making process, giving background information on a student, describing the ebb and flow of an exciting sporting event—the list goes on. In the Information Age in which our students are growing up, with its abundance of easy-to-access information, summarizing becomes an even more important processing skill. Without the ability to sort out and distill information, our students run the risk of being overwhelmed in a sea of data. If we don't strengthen students' summarizing abilities, we are not preparing them well for the future.

*Special Considerations:* "You know, students should know how to summarize before they get to middle school." I hear that one a lot. It may be true, but if students don't know how to summarize, then we need to help them with it, especially with nonfiction. Unfortunately, summarizing gets mentioned often but few teachers spend much time directly, or even indirectly, teaching students how to summarize. The Ten Percent Summary assignment provides some structured steps that will help your students who are not already proficient at summarizing.

Keep in mind that summarizing is not a discrete skill. It actually involves a number of interrelated skills such as finding key words, paraphrasing, categorizing, and finding main ideas. With that in mind, there are several ways you can strengthen some of these component skills in brief, everyday classroom activities. To help your students

with the Ten Percent Summary, consider using some of these activities throughout the year, as often as you feel they are needed:

- Underline Key Words in Quick-Writes – After students have done a Type One or Type Two Writing, ask them to quickly underline important words in their own writing: "Before we talk about your answers, take one more minute, reread your answer, and underline the five most important words. Underline words that, if I only looked at those words, I'd get the gist of your idea." Finding key words is at the heart of summarizing and what better way for students to practice finding key words than identifying their own key words? You may also ask several students, "Before you read your entire answer, just read to me the five words you underlined. I'll see if I get the gist of your answer." These techniques are quick, low-risk, and can be embedded in most any lesson. The frequent practice will help your students improve an important sub-skill of summarizing.
- Use the Draw-the-Line Strategy with Quick-Writes – Another informal technique that can be used with Type One or Type Two Writing is asking students to add notes to original writing: "Everyone, please draw a line under the last line that you just wrote. As we discuss your responses, add things below the line that are interesting ideas or that are good answers that you didn't have." Point out to students that they are not taking dictation (word-for-word transcription of classmates' ideas), but rather writing down the key words that capture the essence of an idea. In fact, you may want to model this for students by listening to an answer and writing on the board as you say to your students, "Yes, that is correct. If you didn't have that, add below the line 'won Nobel Peace Prize'." Effective note-taking is another valuable skill related to summarizing.
- Summarize Short Passages as Type Two Writing – A brief practice activity that you could do often—even as a class warm-up activity—is to give students short paragraphs to summarize. These 75–100 word passages could be read quickly and then summarized in approximately 8–10 words. Practice like this in the short form, will make working with longer passages seem less daunting.
- Practice the Ten Percent Summaries on Intermediate-Length Passages – Before asking students to do a ten percent summary of a 750–1,000 word passage or article, practice on shorter passages that are, say, 250–300 words in length. Remember that the ten percent summary is not just a test of whether students can do it, but a chance to practice, to build their intellectual stamina for the task, and to improve their ability. To accomplish that might mean taking incremental steps like these—especially for students with limited experience with summarizing.

*Differentiating the Assignment:* One way that you can differentiate this assignment based on your diagnosis of your students' needs is by your choice of passage to be summarized. Since you will undoubtedly use this assignment multiple times, you may choose increasingly longer articles as your students' confidence and ability grows.

You may also start with very familiar text structures by using excerpts from your textbook, and then move to less familiar texts such as classroom magazines and eventually to trade or professional articles.

You may also wish to vary the frequency of this assignment with different classes. For those who are not strong summarizers, you may wish to do the assignment more often in order to provide more practice. You may also do much more of the "incremental practice" mentioned above. For more capable students, you may want to do fewer summaries but use longer, more challenging pieces to summarize. Ten percent summaries are excellent homework or extra credit assignments. Not only do students practice summarizing, they are also building background knowledge in the areas they are reading.

Modifying the focus correction areas will also enable you to accommodate different levels of students. For students who need more support, consider using an FCA that requires them to use a certain number of key words from the article ("5 Key Words—Underlined"). By selecting and posting the words to be used, you provide a guide for the less confident students. As they improve with summarizing, you would provide fewer such guides.

For the "To be determined" FCA, here are some other possibilities:

- Include one short, correctly punctuated quotation (3-6 words)
- No more than 4 consecutive words taken from the original text
- Vary sentences (beginnings or lengths)
- Choose among several areas of conventions (complete sentences, spelling, capitalization, legible handwriting, commas)

*About the Procedures:* Two aspects of the procedures—the structured guidelines for rereading and the completion of the I-D-E-A-S guide sheet—are steps that require you to decide just how much support you feel your students need. For students inexperienced with summarizing, you may "walk them through" all of these steps in class as a way to model and clarify how each step works. If you have a Smart Board, it can be a very effective way to model for your students how to use steps in the I-D-E-A-S guide sheet, as you show them in a very concrete way how to delete, eliminate, add, and substitute. With more practice, the steps in this process should become easier for them to do more independently. Let me be clear: It is not the expectation that every time a student summarizes, they would need the I-D-E-A-S guide sheet. But using the guide methodically several times will help students internalize a systematic way of approaching the task.

# Writing a Personal Essay

*Notes to the Teacher*

This assignment has multiple benefits. It asks students to write about a familiar topic —themselves—so it eliminates concerns about the differences in students' prior knowledge. The assignment also gives you some information about your students and their lives beyond school, which might prove useful to you in supporting them as the year goes on. That is one reason you might use this assignment relatively early in the school year. Another reason to use it early is that personal essays are often used in state writing assessments.

*Assignment Rationale:* This project has several goals: Aside from gaining insights into your students' lives, it offers practice in the kind of writing often required in high-stakes assessments. But this is not just intended to be prepping for the state assessments. It is meant to give you an opportunity to help students develop important writing skills such as how to write interesting leads and elaborate their writing.

*Special Considerations:* Depending on the experience of your writers, you may want to do several other personal essays. Multiple opportunities to write personal essays will give less experienced writers comfort with the genre. The following are some other personal essays you might consider using for additional practice:

- *An Important Person*—Write about a person who has made a significant impact in your life.
- *An "Aha" Moment*—Write about an experience in which you gained an insight or understanding that has proved to be important in your life.
- *Achieving an Important Goal*—Tell about a goal that you set for yourself, how you achieved it, and why it was important to you.
- *Doing What Was Right*—Write about a time in your life that you did something that was hard to do even though it was the right thing to do.
- *A Personal or Family Ritual*—Tell about something that you or your family does routinely that is important to you.

*Differentiating the Assignment:* Some students will be able to use the Focus Sheet with little direction from you. Others will need much more support. As a way to familiarize students with how to use the Focus Sheet, you might model its use by completing it as you discuss a skill or hobby that you have outside of school. Depending on the writing ability of your students, you may want to change or substitute FCAs. For example, you might change the first FCA to "Six to eight details" (or some other appropriate number.)

For the "To be determined" FCA, consider these possibilities:

- Vary sentences
- Figurative language (such as metaphors or similes)
- Transitions
- Use of dialogue
- Choose among several areas of conventions (complete sentences, paragraphing, capitalizing proper nouns, use of quotation marks)

*About the Procedures:* If your students are less experienced, you might spend more time working with interesting leads. For example, you might have students select pieces from their writing folders, work in small groups, and select the best lead from those shared in the group. Ask the class, "What did the writer do at the outset of this piece to grab the reader's attention?" Take the agreed upon answer ("Used action" or "Started with an unusual fact") and begin a list of techniques to be posted in the classroom. Another way to use past papers from the folder is to ask students to select a piece and write a new lead for the composition using one of the techniques being discussed in class.

# Writing a Personal Essay

*Using Your Own Life Experience to Make a Point*

**Project Summary:** "Write about what you know." That is the most common advice given to aspiring writers. It is solid advice, because we are each experts on our own lives. We know the details of our daily lives, we think about the meaning and significance of those events, and we connect our experiences to the world around us—our family, school, and social lives. Not surprisingly, personal narratives and essays are often used for state writing assessments. In this writing project you are going to write about an important aspect of your life—something you are good at away from school. We all have talents, skills, and interests outside of school. Some of us have interests and skills with music or dance; others with making things; still others are good at collecting, fixing, or using things. In your personal essay, tell about something that you have a talent or interest in and why it is important to you.

**Writer's Purpose:** This assignment is a personal essay. That is, your writing needs to do more than just recall personal information or events. It is intended to make a point. Your goal with this piece is to make your writing interesting but also to inform the reader about why this interest, activity, or skill is important to you.

**Writer's Role:** You will write as yourself, a thoughtful and reflective middle school student.

**Audience:** For this piece, your audience is someone who is not already familiar with this skill or interest you have. You will need to give a thorough explanation about your interest or skill and explain its importance in your life.

**Form:** This will be a multi-paragraph personal essay.

**Focus Correction Areas:**

1. Attention-getting lead (use a "hook" to grab attention) _____ points
2. 5W's + How (tell about your skill or interest, how you developed it, and why it is important to your life) _____ points
3. To be determined _____ points

**Procedures:** To prepare your autobiographical sketch, you will complete several activities:

- ✓ Type One Writing: Write five lines or more about something outside of school that you are pretty good at and enjoy. It could be a sport, a hobby, an interest, or a skill that you have developed.
- ✓ Before you begin writing, create your own simple graphic organizer to generate and organize your ideas. To make some notes, create a two-column matrix like the one on the next page. **Remember:** Good writers anticipate and answer questions the reader might have. Use the matrix to think about answers to the 5W's + How questions.

| *5 W's + How* | *Notes* |
|---|---|
| **What?** | |
| | |
| **Where?** | |
| | |
| **When?** | |
| | |
| **Who?** | |
| | |
| **Why?** | |
| | |
| **How?** | |
| | |

- ✓ You will work with a partner to ask and answer some questions about the activity or skill. After looking at your partner's graphic organizer, ask your partner several questions to clarify or find out more about the activity or skill.
- ✓ We will review techniques presented on the Tip Sheet for Interesting Leads. Then you will write two different leads for your piece, using two different strategies.
- ✓ Draft your personal essay. Due date: _____.
- ✓ Read your draft in a one-foot voice, and make any changes you feel will improve your analysis.
- ✓ Work with a partner to get feedback on your essay; double-check your FCAs to make sure you have done a good job in those areas.
- ✓ Write a second draft with all of your improvements. Due date: _____.

Tip Sheet

# Interesting Leads for Personal Essays

Here are some techniques you can use to make your leads more interesting and grab the reader's attention:

**Sounds or Noises** Begin your essay with noises or sounds associated with your topic.

Example: *Ssssss. I love the sound of onions sautéing in the pan.*

Your example: _____

_____

**Dialogue** Start with a person talking right at the outset.

Example: *"I don't believe you learned that whole routine that quickly," laughed my coach.*

Your example: _____

_____

**Action** Open in the middle of something happening. Use strong, vibrant verbs.

Example: *I toed the starting line. I breathed deeply and tensed my legs, dreading the crack of the starter's pistol.*

Your example: _____

_____

**Question** Pose a thought-provoking question at the beginning.

Example: *Have you ever wondered how the magician always picks the correct card? I have.*

Your example: _____

_____

**Definition** Define a word or a term at the beginning of your piece.

Example: *Soil is small pieces of rock and decayed matter. I use it to grow my plants.*

Your example: _____

_____

**Quote** Start with a quote from an authority or from someone important to your composition.

Example: *My dad always said, "The first mile is the hardest." So I started training for the race.*

Your example: _____

_____

**Unusual Fact or Detail** Give information that is accurate but surprising.

Example: *Box cameras were first sold in 1888. Now most photographs, like mine, are digital.*

Your example: _____

_____

**Setting Description** Lead with a description of a place or time relevant to your topic.

Example: *There were mirrors on three walls in the studio. There were skylights overhead, so the light was almost blinding. My first dance lesson would surely be a memorable experience.*

Your example: _____

_____

## FAQ About the Guided Research Paper

*Are there certain skills that are prerequisites to this approach?*

Yes, skills such as writing a clear thesis statement, writing persuasively, and summarizing are required in Assignment #1. If your students cannot complete that assignment successfully, do not go on to the other four assignments in this series. Several other assignments in this book (The Ten Percent Summary, Taking a Stand, Summarizing Important Information, and News with a View) are aimed at building these prerequisite skills and should be completed before taking on this project.

*What if a student wants to change his/her thesis after Assignment #1?*

Most students will stay with their original thesis, even after encountering new evidence or information in the research packet. But if students wish to change their thesis because they are thoughtfully engaged with the material, then I'd allow it with this proviso: They should rewrite their first essay so that it is consistent with their current point of view. You might consider giving the students extra credit for rewriting Assignment #1, which could be used to supplement the lowest score on one of the remaining four assignments. These extra points seem a reasonable reward for creating a new essay. Of course, for some students, the rewrite requirement may cause them to stay with their original essay and do the best they can with it.

*Am I providing too much structure? What about when students are given a more general topic, little structure, and a due date?*

Most students go through school having a research paper assigned to them, not taught to them. So it is not surprising that many students have little in the way of a plan for approaching this academic challenge. They most often attack this kind of assignment by stacking fact upon fact, like cord wood, into a poorly organized pile of information. This project attempts to remedy that by providing a step-by-step structure for writing a real research paper, one that is thesis driven—an analysis of an issue, not a report or summary. By showing students how to look at an issue and develop a thesis, how to summarize, paraphrase, and use quotes from source material, how to strengthen their leads and conclusions, and how to site their sources, we prepare them for the less structured assignments they will face in the future. Remember that this is a guided teaching experience. To make sure that your students see these as five interrelated assignments—and not five unrelated assignments—talk with them about the process as they go through it. Remind them where they are in the process, where they have been, and where they are going next. Show them how steps and deadlines can be broken down into manageable segments that lead to a final

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product. This is the kind of instruction and practice less experienced writers need to become more independent.

*How can I accommodate the variety of abilities I have in my class?*

There are several ways to modify this project to meet varying needs and ability levels. In each of the five assignments there are FCAs that can be modified to meet different students' needs. In the Notes section that introduces each assignment, I have made suggestions for modifying the FCAs. Another way to differentiate for your students is in the research packet itself. You will want to include a variety of materials. Some could be more accessible and provide basic information; others could be more challenging and include more subtle ideas on the topic. Stronger writers may be required to draw from the more sophisticated sources. Less experienced writers may rely more on the easier-to-read sources or use fewer sources.

*Since students are given a research packet, when do they learn research skills?*

A separate unit on research is probably the best approach. You may coordinate this with your school's media center teacher where these skills are usually taught. But, if time permits, you might spend a bit of your class time on research skills as well. Most middle school students are pretty comfortable with the print resources in the library and how to find them. Recent technology surveys reveal how Internet savvy most of our students are. Consider these national statistics cited by technology leaders from one of the school districts I have worked with over the past few years (Gustafson and Magley, 2008):

- 8–18 year olds spend over 44 hours per week on average in front of a screen
- 93% of teenagers use the Internet frequently
- 22% of teenagers have their own websites

So using search engines to look for information on the Internet is not unfamiliar to most students. What they can use help on is sifting through the abundance of sources to find helpful and relevant information. Just for practice, you might occasionally ask students to do web-based scavenger hunts or, one of my favorites, a twenty-minute web-based report on some topic that requires students to do some paraphrasing, summarizing, quoting, and formally cite the websites used. You might even select a different topic than the one used for this project and ask students to contribute to a research packet for next year's class.