Argumentative Writing
Research and Directions in Learning and Teaching

The following document is meant to help you understand current trends and directions in the research around teaching argumentative writing in history. Facing History and Ourselves is concerned with many aspects of a learner's identity—from moral philosopher to analytical thinker to ethical decision maker to historical reasoner—and recognizes the need for our students to become profound thinkers and writers. The following information is intended to help you consider how to support your students in this journey.

I. What We Want for Our Students as Thinkers and Writers

Growth Mindset and Writers' Dispositions
Recent research by Dweck indicates that people can hold two different beliefs, or “mindsets,” about intelligence: the “fixed” mindset (in which people believe they either are smart or stupid, good or bad at specific skills) and the “growth” mindset (in which people believe they can get better at things and are always learning). Facing History and Ourselves fully embraces the growth mindset; we hope to encourage students and teachers to see students through that lens.

Experts in the field of writing instruction indicate that in order for students to succeed as writers in college and careers, they need certain dispositions, perhaps even more than specific skills. These dispositions include curiosity; engagement; appreciation of craft; ability to reflect, analyze, synthesize, and revise; willingness to give and receive feedback; persistence in moving beyond the self; and valuing reading and writing as powerful tools for inquiry.

When teaching writing, help students know that all writers are always learning and growing. Writing is not something you either “can” or “can’t” do, something you are either “good at” or “bad at.” Support and celebrate students’ curiosity, persistence, and willingness to reflect on their own thinking and writing. Given Facing History’s focus on intellectual, social, and moral development, we encourage teachers to “teach the writer, not the writing.” Help them learn about themselves as writers in ways that allow them to transfer that learning to future writing tasks and other life challenges.

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3 Lucy Calkins, The Art of Teaching Writing (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994).
**Argument**

Students demonstrate their strong analytical thinking by crafting oral and written arguments. These skills are emphasized in the Common Core Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies. Specifically, Writing Anchor Standard 1 demands that students write arguments on discipline-specific content within a history classroom. This is not to be confused with merely writing a persuasive essay; the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) focuses on text-based historical writing that argues for a point of view.

The most commonly referenced model for written argument was developed by Stephen Toulmin. Toulmin described six key elements/concepts with which an argument can be analyzed and constructed.

- **Claim**: the statement you are asking others to accept
- **Grounds**: the basis of persuasion; the data, evidence, and reasons
- **Warrant**: the link or “glue” that holds the evidence and claim together, explaining how and why the evidence helps prove the claim
- **Backing**: the additional support for the warrant
- **Qualifier**: indicates strength of the leap from claim to warrant; may limit universality of the claims
- **Rebuttal**: acknowledgment of counterarguments; typically includes own claims, grounds, warrants

The CCSSI notes, “Crafting an argument frequently relies on using information; similarly, an analysis of a subject will likewise include argumentative elements. While these forms are not strictly independent, what is critical to both forms of writing is the use and integration of evidence. In historical, technical, and scientific writing, accuracy matters, and students should demonstrate their knowledge through precision and detail.”

Persuasion is a *subset* of argument, in which authors intentionally use rhetorical devices to compel their readers. There are different types of argument, including those based on facts and reason, character, and values. Facing History emphasizes both reasoning and empathy when crafting written arguments and wants students to find their voice and claim their

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8 Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz, *Everything's an Argument*. 

power by being able to argue for a point of view. At the heart of argument is the relationship between claims, grounds (evidence), and warrants (analysis). Students may better understand the kind of thinking you want them to do if you show them this visual and teach them the “language” of argument. Many students struggle when learning to craft effective analysis/warrants. Students need to make explicit to their audience how the evidence supports the claim, rather than expecting readers to infer.

**Critical Thinking**

To be engaged citizens, students need to be able to analyze, question, and critique texts.⁹ At Facing History, we encourage teachers to use learning-centered teaching strategies that nurture students’ literacy and critical thinking skills within a respectful classroom culture.

As defined by experts in the field of literacy,

*Critical thinking* is the ability to analyze a situation or text and make thoughtful decisions based on that analysis. Writers use critical writing and reading to develop and represent the processes and products of their critical thinking. For example, writers may be asked to write about familiar or unfamiliar texts, examining assumptions about the texts held by different audiences. Through critical writing and reading, writers think through ideas, problems, and issues; identify and challenge assumptions; and explore multiple ways of understanding.¹⁰

Teachers can help writers develop critical thinking by providing opportunities to

- read texts from multiple points of view;
- write about texts for multiple purposes, including (but not limited to) interpretation, synthesis, response, summary, critique, and analysis;
- craft written responses to texts that put the writer’s ideas in conversation with those in a text;
- evaluate sources for credibility, bias, quality of evidence, and quality of reasoning;
- conduct primary and secondary research using a variety of print and non-print sources;
- write texts for various audiences and purposes that are informed by research (e.g., to support ideas or positions, to illustrate alternative perspectives); and
- generate questions to guide research.¹¹

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¹⁰ “Framework for Success,” CWPA, NCTE, and NWP.

¹¹ Ibid.
Facing History has always emphasized critical thinking as a cornerstone of civic engagement. One can only engage with society if one asks the hard questions and views issues from many angles.

**Historical Reasoning ("Disciplinary Literacy")**

Students in Facing History classrooms have myriad opportunities to develop their general analytical thinking skills. They also have an opportunity to develop more specific "historical reasoning."¹²

Literacy scholars have begun to focus on this idea of "disciplinary literacy": the advanced, specialized literacies required for one to read, write, and think about specific content in ways most valued by a given academic discipline¹³ and that advance disciplinary understanding.¹⁴ Monte-Sano has researched the disciplinary literacy specific to "historical writing" (when students write arguments about historical events) and states the following:

- "Historical reasoning involves reading evidence from the perspective of those who created it and placing it into context. Such contextualization is central to history, in that historians may only interrogate artifacts from the past";¹⁵
- "In constructing historical arguments, writing is often inextricable from a disciplinary way of thinking and working with evidence. According to history experts, the use and framing of evidence in historical writing indicate key aspects of disciplinary reasoning, including recognizing biases in sources, comparing evidence, situating evidence in its context, and taking into account different perspectives and multiple causes"¹⁶;
- Strong use of evidence in historical writing includes the following "benchmarks"¹⁷:
  - **Factual and interpretive accuracy**: offering evidence that is correct and interpretations that are plausible
  - **Persuasiveness of evidence**: including evidence that is relevant and strong

¹² Monte-Sano, “Beyond Reading Comprehension.”
¹⁴ Monte-Sano, “Beyond Reading Comprehension,” 218.
¹⁵ Monte-Sano, “Disciplinary Literacy in History,” 541.
¹⁶ Monte-Sano, “Disciplinary Literacy in History.”
¹⁷ Benchmarks of strong use of evidence developed by Monte-Sano, based on prior thinking of Wineburg (199) as found in Monte-Sano, “Beyond Reading Comprehension,” 213. Monte-Sano, “Disciplinary Literacy in History.”
in terms of helping to prove the claim
- **Sourcing of evidence:** noting what the source is and its credibility and/or bias
- **Corroboration of evidence:** recognizing how different documents work together to support a claim
- **Contextualization of evidence:** placing the evidence into its appropriate historical context

Facing History materials invite and require strong historical reasoning, since students are required to examine evidence carefully, consider the assumptions and bias of specific authors or sources, and consistently come to strong interpretations about historical events.

**II. What This Means for Our Teaching**

**Teach Writing Processes**

Anyone who has written—whether composing with traditional pen and paper or with the use of electronic technologies—knows that writing is messy, complex, and anything but linear. Students engage in myriad cognitive activities as they write.

Scholars no longer think of “the” singular linear writing process. Rather, the process is multifaceted and recursive. As stated recently in the framework prepared by three leading writing organizations:

*Writing processes* are the multiple strategies writers use to approach and undertake writing and research. Writing processes are not linear. Successful writers use different processes that vary over time and depend on the particular task. For example, a writer may research a topic before drafting, then after receiving feedback conduct additional research as part of revising. Writers learn to move back and forth through different stages of writing, adapting those stages to the situation. This ability to employ flexible writing processes is important as students encounter different types of writing tasks.

Students need to learn to toggle back and forth between the messy thinking and putting that thinking into a coherent and clear written form. They also need to practice key rhetorical concepts to help them understand why they are writing. They need help thinking about concepts such as audience, purpose, context, and genre. We see this writing as a crucial part of the journey of a Facing History student; it is a process where students test their assumptions and routinely reevaluate their ideas, thinking critically about the information

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19 “Framework for Success,” CWPA, NCTE, and NWP.

20 Ibid.
they are studying and communicating these thoughts to the world around them.

**Use Inquiry; Embed Authentic Experiences and Explicit Instruction**

Overall, Facing History takes an inquiry approach: the curriculum is designed to engage students in the moral and philosophical questions regarding historical events and individual choices within a developmental context. Researchers have found that a similar “inquiry-based” mode of writing instruction has the greatest effects on student achievement.21 Basically, this means that the teacher provides clear and specific objectives about the writing, chooses rich materials to engage students in the thinking that sits underneath the writing, and creates activities like small-group problem-centered discussions that invite high levels of peer interaction. This inquiry mode is in contrast to both the “presentation” mode (lecturing students on how to write) and the “natural process” mode (learning writing by doing, with little explicit instruction).

In the field of writing research, scholars debate how people learn language forms—such as argumentative writing—that are not their primary discourse.22 Some argue that secondary discourses can't be taught and are best learned “through experience by participating in situated use of particular language forms.” Others argue that language is best learned “through tutelage and explicit instruction in its structures and forms.”23

The middle ground asserts that “language is best learned through a combination . . . of [authentic] experience and explicit instruction” about the specific techniques or “moves” writers make.24 As Lisa Delpit states, “Merely adopting direct instruction is not the answer. Actual writing for real audiences and real purposes is a vital element in helping students to understand that they have an important voice in their own learning process.”25

To honor inquiry and authenticity, Facing History has created essential questions directly linked to the writing tasks that help frame students' inquiry for the unit. We have built in many opportunities for students to engage in the thinking related to writing in small-group problem-solving/inquiry contexts. And we include strategies for explicit teaching of argument and historical reasoning, and how to transfer that thinking into a final written essay.

**Model and Provide Mentor Texts**

21 Hillocks, *Research on Written Composition.*
24 Purcell-Gates, Duke, and Martineau, “Genre-Specific Text.”
Just as students benefit from seeing more skilled athletes or musicians as they are learning a sport or instrument, students benefit from seeing real writers at work as they learn to write argumentative essays. In the field of writing instruction, this includes both the use of “mentor texts” and use of teacher or peer models of how you are crafting a piece of writing.

Fundamentally, the use of mentor texts invites students to “notice and name” the particular techniques a writer has used to have an effect on an audience. Students come to understand more about the criteria for good writing from actually analyzing good writing than from simply reading a rubric. Reading others’ writing through this lens helps students think about the writer’s purpose, and the ideas presented in the piece, and then to think about the specific techniques the writer used to have an impact on the reader. In this resource, we include examples of argumentative essays that your students can read, analyze, critique, revise, and emulate.

Students also benefit from seeing writers in process. Studies indicate that when teachers show students how they cope with problems as writers, students make gains. By modeling for students how you actually move through the challenges of writing an argumentative essay, you offer students metacognitive language of self-assessment and revision.

Feedback and Self-Assessment

Facing History has designed assignments that invite alternative perspectives, and thus invite students to revise their thinking. In order to do so, students need clear, specific, constructive feedback. Students need to communicate clearly and respectfully with peers about how they might improve their writing. And ultimately, students need to become metacognitive, conscious of their own writing choices and challenges and able to independently self-assess and improve their own writing.

Scholar Brian Cambourne found that children most easily acquire early facility with oral and written language when certain “conditions” exist. One of those conditions is “response”: listening to students’ thinking, welcoming their comments and questions, and extending their use of written and oral language. The same is true for adolescents. Students need to know that their thinking is valued. They also benefit from specific response.

There is some disagreement in the field about whether a “direct” stance (telling students what to fix) or an “indirect” stance (telling students your actual thinking about their thinking)

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26 Katie Wood Ray, Study Driven.
27 Beach and Friedrich, “Response to Writing,” 227.
28 Ibid.
29 Brian Cambourne, The Whole Story: Natural Learning and the Acquisition of Literacy in the Classroom (Jefferson, MO: Scholastic, 1988).
helps writers improve more. Some specific findings regarding feedback on student writing include:31

- Written comments are often too vague or global.
- Students value audio-taped comments, which seem more authentic, as if the reader is in dialogue with the writer.
- All students, particularly English-language learners, benefit from one-on-one conferences about their writing. Conferring helps students verbalize their thoughts, helps teachers introduce specialized vocabulary, and allows teachers to ask probing questions to help students clarify their thinking.
- Peer feedback is helpful if peers are taught to provide specific, descriptive feedback and have good process skills to collaborate.
- Students like teachers to correct their errors (since it is more efficient) but need to learn to correct their own.

In Facing History classrooms, students are encouraged to revise their thinking as well as their writing. Teachers can support students as thinkers and writers by responding authentically to their ideas and by giving specific recommendations on how to convey those ideas more effectively. They can also help peers learn to do this with and for one another.

**Conclusion**

As Ted Sizer stated in the introduction to the book *The Right to Literacy in Secondary Schools* by Suzanne Plaut, “Literacy . . . is the fuel for freedom.” Plaut herself goes to say that literacy is “a social imperative . . . [which] enables students to have a voice, take a stand, and make a difference. In other words, it gives them power.”32

We believe that by teaching argumentation and critical thinking in your classroom through the lens of writing, thinking, and discussion, you will be giving students tools to access freedom, power, and civic agency.

In the curriculum materials that follow, we have tried to find intersections between Facing History and Ourselves pedagogy, analytical thinking, and argumentative writing to help you on your journey as a Facing History teacher.

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31 Beach and Friedrich, “Response to Writing.”