Teaching Writing Is Teaching Thinking

Helping students express themselves has always been central to Facing History's mission and curriculum. Writing—exploratory, formal, playful, provocative—helps students to engage self and others and to deepen their understanding about important historical content and themes. Teaching writing will empower you to engage students both with the big ideas of history and with the power of their own minds.

Fundamentally, teaching writing is teaching thinking. That is something Facing History teachers already value. We hope you will find that this resource enhances and extends your existing expertise.

Thinking and Writing
Thinking and writing have rich connections; one does not precede the other. As historian Lynn Hunt says, “Writing means many different things to me but one thing it is not: writing is not the transcription of thoughts already consciously present in my mind. Writing is a magical and mysterious process that makes it possible to think differently.”¹ This is equally true whether one “writes” the old-fashioned way (putting pen to paper) or composes and reworks ideas with the use of electronic technologies.

About the Writing Tasks
Fundamentally, if students are to be strong writers, they need to be strong analytical thinkers. And they need content worth thinking about.² We had this in mind when designing the specific writing tasks. Note that the tasks

- serve as essential questions for students to revisit throughout a unit;
- correspond to aspects of the Facing History journey;
- engage students ethically, intellectually, and emotionally;
- address core concepts—such as significance, causation, agency, evidence, and continuity and change—that allow students to build historical understanding;
- demand the sort of text-dependent analysis recommended in the Common Core Standards.

Patterns of Thinking Students Use When Crafting Written Arguments
This resource is divided into seven sections, based on patterns of thinking that historians (and other scholars) use when analyzing content and crafting written arguments. The goal is to

² George Hillocks, Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching (Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and the National Conference on Research in English, 1986).
support students in their thinking and in the clear expression of that thinking for a specific purpose and audience. This approach differs considerably from the generic and outdated concept of “the” writing process.

A. Understanding the Task
In order to write a strong essay, students need to know what they are being asked to think about and need to have something to say. One challenge for many student writers is that they lack sufficient understanding of the content. As Joan Didion once stated, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see, and what it means.” The strategies in Section A are designed to help students engage with the big moral issues they will write about formally later. Note that many of the strategies in Section A are writing—early, exploratory, messy writing to help students formulate and develop lines of thought.

B. Gathering and Analyzing Evidence
The strategies in Section B help students think about what they are reading and learning. Historical reasoning requires students to focus on evidence, perspective, and interpretation. By careful and close reading of a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, students begin to develop their own arguments. They learn to examine evidence carefully to determine whether it is accurate, credible, and persuasive. Note that these strategies help students engage with the evidence, and they precede the work of actually synthesizing the evidence and crafting a thesis statement.

C. Crafting a Thesis and Organizing Ideas
Much of historical thinking and writing involves forming strong arguments or interpretations based on the core concepts in history: Why does this matter? How did this happen? What motivated people in the past to think and act in the ways they did? How do we know what we know? How was this past situation similar to present-day situations? Fundamentally, the strategies in Section C help students learn to sort out “What is my perspective on this issue?” Note that we placed crafting a thesis after students have many opportunities to examine the evidence. A recent study found that college professors express concern that many students leap to writing a thesis before they have explored their ideas in sufficient detail. Here, crafting a thesis and organizing ideas are paired, as a way to help students begin to integrate, synthesize, and categorize their ideas.

D. Proving Your Point through Logical Reasoning in Body Paragraphs

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3 Hillocks, *Research on Written Composition.*
Argumentative essays typically have one central argument (the thesis or central claim) and multiple smaller arguments in which the author presents a claim or reason, cites evidence, and offers analysis. This analysis, technically called a warrant, is the glue and evidence together. In this section, we include strategies to help students practice orally linking claims, evidence, and analysis. We also include ways to help students learn more flexible ways to present those ideas so their writing feels fresh, not formulaic.

E. Framing and Connecting Ideas in Introductions and Conclusions

Facing History aims for students to make connections between history and the choices they make in their own lives. We believe that students are most engaged when they are stimulated intellectually, emotionally, and ethically. When writing a formal/academic argumentative essay, students demonstrate that they can make these big conceptual connections mostly in the opening and closing paragraphs. In this section, we include strategies that support students in first making those connections to the here and now and then expressing those connections in ways that are clear and compelling to their audience.

F. Revising and Editing to Impact Your Audience

Students can substantially improve their logic and expression when they receive clear, specific, constructive feedback. They also become better readers of their own writing when they analyze and critique others’ writing—both “mentor texts” from the real world and their peers’ writing. During the revising stage, students clarify, reorganize, and strengthen the content of their paper. This section provides two sorts of strategies to revise or “rework” earlier writing: peer feedback and self-assessment. While Facing History sees the importance of copyediting one’s writing to address grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors, in this resource we emphasize the broader challenges of helping students effectively develop and express their reasoning.

G. Publishing/Sharing/Reflecting

Thinkers write for many purposes; the purpose of formal writing is to express an idea to an audience. It is important to end the writing process with an opportunity for students to share what they wrote with their peers or an outside audience. In this section, we include strategies and suggestions for how students can make their thinking public. We also include ways that students can think about what they learned about the topic and about themselves as writers.

H. Understanding the Task

In order to write a strong essay, students need to know what they are being asked to think about and need to have something to say. One challenge for many student writers is that they

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8 Andrea Lunsford and John Ruszkiewicz, Everything’s an Argument, 2nd ed. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), 95.
11 Hillocks, Research on Written Composition.
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I. Gathering and Analyzing Evidence

The strategies in Section B help students think about what they are reading and learning. Historical reasoning requires students to focus on evidence, perspective, and interpretation.13 By careful and close reading of a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, students begin to develop their own arguments. They learn to examine evidence carefully to determine whether it is accurate, credible, and persuasive.14 Note that these strategies help students engage with the evidence, and they precede the work of actually synthesizing the evidence and crafting a thesis statement.

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K. Proving Your Point through Logical Reasoning in Body Paragraphs

Argumentative essays typically have one central argument (the thesis or central claim) and multiple smaller arguments in which the author presents a claim or reason, cites evidence, and offers analysis. This analysis, technically called a warrant, is the glue and evidence together.16 In this section, we include strategies to help students practice orally linking claims, evidence, and analysis. We also include ways to help students learn more flexible ways to present those ideas so their writing feels fresh, not formulaic.

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