

A Veteran Teacher's Lessons: Teaching Argumentative Writing

High school kids love to argue, ask any parent. And if you pick the right topic in class, our students like a good debate. They are passionate about persuading classmates that their opinion is right. We can help them improve their persuasive powers by teaching them the art of argumentative writing with evidence.

The [Common Core](#) requires our students to: *Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.*

When teaching either [informational writing](#) or argumentative writing, a good starting point for teachers is to use a formative or pre-assessment to gauge your students' writing skills.

I designed a formative argumentative writing assessment for my US History students. The topic was: [Thomas Jefferson - Hero or Hypocrite?](#) I asked students to read two articles on Jefferson with opposing points of view. They were to make a claim and support it with evidence from one of the sources. I used the [argumentative essay rubric](#) to judge their first attempts. They understood that their efforts were not to be graded, but served as a baseline assessment of their argumentative writing skills.

After looking at their first efforts, I decided I needed to [help students to write a clear claim](#). I did this through a commonly used humorous example, [“dogs are better than cats.”](#) I also gave them practice, by having them [look at six different claims](#) to decide which claim was the strongest.

Before writing a longer argumentative essay, I had my English Learners focus on argumentative paragraph writing. When studying immigration, my students were asked to write an argumentative paragraph. The prompt: [Should Angel Island be called the Ellis Island of the West?](#) In addition to textbook and lecture, students gathered information from several sources including: [An Interactive Tour of Ellis Island](#) by Scholastic and a short KQED video from the website called, [Angel Island: the Stories Behind the Poems](#). Students organized their information on a [top hat organizer](#), which helped them to compare the two experiences.

Then it was time to write. Students could choose to argue the similarities or the differences between the experiences of newcomers to Angel and Ellis Islands. Their claim had to be supported with detailed evidence, drawing on the historical record of both European and Asian immigrants in the late nineteenth century.

After shorter exercises in argumentative writing, I had my US History students write several longer argumentative essays, including ones on [immigration](#) and [Japanese American Internment](#).

At the heart of argumentative writing is evidence. In the cases above I provided evidence for my students. However, for my seniors I wanted them to research and find their own credible sources of information to support their claim.

Many of my seniors were still floundering with the basics of [writing a research paper](#), so I designed a series of lessons to take them through the process. First was a lesson on [writing an introduction](#). Second, I did a lesson on [writing strong body paragraphs](#), comparing a detailed paragraph to a delicious sandwich. Finally, I provided a [template to help them make an outline](#) for their research paper.

If your students are like mine, they have a hard time citing their sources. [Easybib.com](#) and other web tools can help. In addition, our school has a subscription to [turnitin.com](#), which provides a fast way for teachers and students to check for plagiarism, so common with the rise of Internet research where students can just cut and paste. In addition, there are several free online writing tools such as [grammarcheck](#). These are very helpful.

Whether we assign short or longer pieces of argumentative writing, we need to help our students cite credible evidence in support of their claim. Writing is one of those skills that is key to college and career. We won't make all our students great writers; however, it is our job help them leave our classrooms better writers. If we do that, we have given our students a gift that keeps on giving.