Learning About Language: A Teacher’s Guide

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Learning About Language

A Teacher’s Guide

By
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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation from the Western Oregon University Honors Program

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To my parents, Mark and Lori Roan, for going with me on this adventure.
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Abstract

Academic language, while a key component of language arts education and Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, is often poorly understood by educators. Academic language and its norms must be taught explicitly in language arts classrooms in order for students to be proficient writers of academic genres and for testing purposes. This project provides a literature review on academic language instruction and writing instruction at the secondary level. The guidebook for academic language includes several lesson plans to assist educators in teaching academic language and its features. The features of academic language are outlined using authentic texts that teachers can use in their own classrooms.
Introduction

The goal of this project is to create a guidebook for academic language and basic grammar for high school ELA teachers based on the Common Core state standards for writing in Oregon at a ninth and tenth grade level. The rationale for this guidebook will be supported by previous research, which will be compiled into a research essay. Through this guidebook, teachers will have a simple and effective resource to reference, which will help them teach students to create conscious and appropriate writing choices. This will in turn create student writers who are better equipped to write for academic and formal genres.

Previous research shows that English language arts (ELA) educators are not confident in their knowledge of their content area and tend to rely largely on two things: assumptions about and simple definitions of grammar. Because of this situation, ELA educators are not able to effectively teach their students about academic language. Academic language is essentially a genre of writing used in scholarly contexts. Though it is most often known for being used at a university level, writing using academic language begins even before high school; because it has specific features that differ from other genres of writing, explicit instruction in those features is needed. At a high school level, explicit linguistic instruction is rare. Often, writers are expected to
understand and use the features of academic language via their linguistic instincts, but the genre is different from the language used in their everyday lives or for writing in other genres. This difficulty becomes even more pronounced when non-native English speakers are required to use it, but do not receive explicit instruction in the ways in which academic language differs from colloquial English or more casual genres.

Because many teachers do not have a strong linguistic backgrounds, academic language has not been commonly and explicitly taught in schools. Many English teachers have degrees focused in literature, not linguistics and writing, which makes it more difficult for them to express to their students the specific markers of the genre. Furthermore, because the teachers themselves do not fully understand how language functions and what the markers of academic language are, they are reluctant to teach it. Sweeping linguistic generalizations are used in an attempt to meet students’ linguistic needs, but those generalizations ultimately hinder students’ understanding of the genre. This project examines previous studies on this topic and uses them to justify the final product: a guidebook to academic writing.

**Linguistics and education**

One key reason for the neglect of linguistic instruction in schools has to do with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the more recent Common
Core State Standards (CCSS). No Child Left Behind focused primarily on reading literacy instruction, creating a trend of neglect in regard to writing literacy. CCSS sought to equalize the quality and content of instruction taught nationwide, and thus has more specific standards regarding writing and language. However, CCSS still focuses on the product students create (as opposed to the process), and generalizes the linguistic features required, expecting teachers to instruct their students in these areas in more detail. By focusing on products and not processes, CCSS does not provide information to teachers about *how* to teach content or the norms of genres, so teachers must be able to articulate to students the ways in which texts can be produced. Furthermore, where the Common Core College and Career Readiness standards emphasize academic language, they fail to specify what constitutes this product. In other words, the College and Career Readiness standards do not explicitly differentiate between genres, making the product “academic language” ambiguous.

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts are divided into five categories: Writing, Reading Literature, Reading Informational Text, Speaking and Listening, and Language. Within the Writing category, standards focus on the three main types of writing (argument, informative/explanatory, and narrative). Most academic texts are primarily
argumentative; this aligns with academic texts’ goal of persuasion. Authors of academic texts are normally seeking to persuade their audience through research and conclusions from it to agree with a particular point of view, even if the text is not explicitly arguing. Informative or narrative elements may be present in an academic text, but are not primary, and are used to support the argumentative core.

In order for students to successfully participate in academic discourse, they must understand the differences in the three main genres of writing. This guidebook will focus only on the features of argumentative writing since that genre is the most expected, used, and accessible academic text style.

Below is a list of CCSS for 9th and 10th grade that are affiliated with academic language use (Oregon Department of Education, 2010).

- W.9-10.1
- W.9-10.4
- W.9-10.5
- L.9-10.1
- L.9-10.3
- L.9-10.4
- L.9-10.6
It is important that teachers are able to communicate specific, linguistically-accurate information about a variety of texts requiring academic language to their students in order for them to be prepared for college-level writing courses and tasks. When teachers are unable to explain specifically to students how they should improve or change their writing, and students struggle to make changes. Currently, guidebooks exist for academic language and for fulfilling Common Core state standards, but they are not integrated; furthermore, guidebooks to writing or academic language are generally targeted toward students and continue to be based on linguistic generalizations or historically perpetuated inaccuracies. It is the goal of this project to create a guidebook for academic language specifically targeted toward teachers, which should enable them to better explain the markers of the academic register to their students and the importance of understanding these markers.
Literature Review

Writing is becoming increasingly critical in high school instruction. With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, the emphasis of literacy in United States public schools increased dramatically, though a heavier emphasis was put on reading literacy. The Common Core state standards (CCSS) were adopted in Oregon in 2010 with the goal of increasing “the likelihood that all students, no matter where they live, are prepared for success in college and the workplace” (Oregon Department of Education, 2010).

While CCSS has sought to create a more equal educational environment in Oregon, the fact remains that education continues to be an equity issue. The CCSS are a clear reminder of the existence of a power structure within schools that is reflective of the larger power culture. In every society, there is one culture that dominates the others. This culture of power informs what norms are established in the society, which influences what and how content is taught in schools (Delpit, 1988). In Oregon and in the United States at large, there are diverse cultures that do not have the same norms as the culture of power, yet are subjected to them in educational settings. These types of minority cultures may belong to people of color, immigrants, the economically disadvantaged, etc. Those born into the culture are already
aware of the norms within the culture of power. For those who are part of a minority culture, the expectation to know and use the culture of power’s norms is difficult and creates inequity because there is no explicit instruction provided. The culture of power currently emphasizes writing and communication skills, so those who are able to communicate clearly are more likely to be successful in career and college. The key to ensuring the success sought by CCSS is to empower students outside of the culture of power to understand and participate in the society’s norms through explicit, culturally conscious instruction (Delpit, 1988). By explicitly teaching the norms of academic language -- a type of writing present in the current culture of power -- teachers enable students to successfully participate in the culture regardless of their background.

It is important to note, however, that culturally-informed education can only occur if the educators themselves recognize the importance of each student. Often, learning environments resemble less a place of acceptance and mentorship and are more similar to a medical facility (Shaughnessy, 1976). The current model holds that students come in with problems, and it is the responsibility of the teacher to assist in the diagnosis and resolution of those problems. Many times, however, these “problems” are actually an instance of linguistic variation, where students’ internal grammar simply differs from
what is expected. The negative yet common attitude causes students to feel defeated and not receive the instruction and assistance that would benefit them far better than “treatment.” In addition, this attitude benefits a small subset of students who come into school already advantaged, and it works greatly against the students who have not been equally prepared for an academic setting. The status of “insider” or “outsider” tends to be awarded based on student preparation prior to the actual class, meaning students who have better resources and are more prepared for academic settings are supported effectively, while students who have not been equally prepared are disregarded.

Teachers often inadvertently view students as outsiders to the community of knowledge, a concept known as “Guarding the Tower” (Shaughnessy, 1976). When teachers guard the tower of knowledge (the content they teach), they exclude students they view as unfit to participate in the discourse. This attitude in writing classes causes students to view themselves as poor writers because they have no way of knowing what they are doing wrong. All they are told is that they are not ready to know the full extent of the information and must adequately fix themselves before they will receive full instruction. In reality, it is not the students who are at fault; they cannot be expected to know what no one has taught them (particularly
non-native English speaking students). It is the negative attitude and
dismissal of the teachers that cause students to view themselves poorly.
Restrictive expectations caused by a strict adherence to prescriptive language
rules result in the writing classroom becoming unproductive. Often, this
prescriptive attitude toward language and grammar is informed more by
myth and tradition than actual linguistic knowledge, much less knowledge
about student background and needs.

A more advanced stage is called “Converting the Natives”
(Shaughnessy, 1976). When teachers convert the natives, they release slightly
their preconceptions of what students should be like. There are, in the
teacher’s view, a few students who may be educable (typically students who
are somewhat prepared for an advanced academic environment). This stage
is common of teachers who are uncomfortable working with students who
struggle with writing, but are willing to make an attempt at helping the
students who do not require as much support. It is in this stage that formulas
for writing often appear (such as the five paragraph essay). Additionally,
formulaic writing is all the teacher believes students are able to grasp.
Formulas for writing, which are inauthentic, are easier to teach than raw,
authentic writing. In addition, formulaic writing is much easier to teach, but is
a less realistic representation of the writing process and types of writing (five
paragraph essays are not normally found outside of an academic environment, yet are perpetuated in high stakes testing and academic environments). When these formulas are not effective, students and teachers become frustrated. Because the teachers in this stage do not have enough diverse content knowledge to find new strategies for students with differing needs, formulas are the easiest option. For overworked and overwhelmed teachers, formulaic writing is also much easier to grade.

A third stage, “Sounding the Depths,” occurs when the teacher begins to more thoroughly examine and observe not only the students as writers, but themselves as a writer (Shaughnessy, 1976). This stage requires more advanced content and language knowledge because the teacher must look for patterns in writing and grammar. The teacher must examine their own and others’ writing to identify important concepts like purpose, genre, and audience and the ways in which those elements affect their writing. They must notice what intentional choices they make in their writing and the purpose for those choices. Prescriptive rules are no longer sufficient because it must be acknowledged that there are many different norms for various genres and registers of writing. Prescriptive grammar -- or the “rules” for language often established through tradition and textbooks -- are what we often think of in regard to proper comma use, dangling participles, and so on.
While these rules may apply in some cases, they are not reflective of Standard English, or the English language that is used in day-to-day life (and is also the English with which students are most familiar). When teachers are aware of students’ internal grammar, they can discover that patterns may deviate from norms and not follow a formula. It is important in this stage to look for students’ internal grammar, especially for non-native English speakers. All language is patterned, but language is also not a formula.

The final stage, Diving In, refers to when the teacher themselves becomes a student. When teachers are ignorant of their subject area, they are unable to understand their students or what it is they are trying to teach. This means teachers of writing must become incredibly familiar with language and linguistics and actually understand the ways in which students’ experiences and how they process language affect their writing. In this stage, writing takes on a different role in the classroom; it is no longer a formula to be taught, but an experience to practice. In this stage, a teacher would have a strong understanding of purpose, genre, and register.

The four stages Shaughnessy presents are useful in discussing the attitudes writing instructors hold but also the reasons for those attitudes. Shaughnessy provides a basis for discussing the education teachers of writing receive and how that affects the instruction they provide students. The idea
that students are the ones who need to “catch up” or change ignores the fact that teachers are in a position where they could adjust to provide a better education for their students by being better educated themselves, viewing education differently, or being flexible with their students. Shaughnessy also introduces an important concept about how writing instruction occurs: that rather than being a simple transfer of knowledge from teacher to students, writing instruction requires an understanding of a student’s internal understanding of language and writing. If the teacher understands a student’s needs, this latter type of instruction can occur. Teachers must understand what an individual student needs to be successful and what barriers must be removed in order for the student to achieve. If a teacher’s own education has encouraged them to view students as being in deficit, that will impact the way they provide instruction. Teachers, therefore, must have adequate knowledge of their subject to be able to identify gaps in students’ knowledge and assist them in a way that promotes skill building.

In order to determine how teachers’ own education must change, it is necessary to examine existing research on the vocabulary and language features of academic writing (Coxhead and Byrd, 2007). When teachers have knowledge of the literature and skills needed to examine academic writing and identify its characteristics, they can identify what skills or knowledge
their students need in order to become fluent writers of academic texts. The concept of “language-in-use,” which refers to the grammar and vocabulary actually used for communication settings, is crucial because it has to do not only with what is possible with language, but what is actually, functionally done in a genre (in this case, academic writing) (Coxhead and Byrd, 2007). For example, if a teacher examined language-in-use in an opinion editorial newspaper article, the language would look very different from the language used in a peer-reviewed literary criticism. By examining the literature of academic writing, teachers are better able to identify what in their students’ writing needs to change to fit the genre and what can be left out of instruction.

However, this does mean that writers for whom English is a first language may rely excessively on their native speaker intuition, which can be inaccurate given the context. Furthermore, academic language is not a first language, even for native English speakers; academic language is very different from Standard English. While native English speakers are likely to have some amount of familiarity with a wide range of vocabulary, not all vocabulary occurs within the same contexts. It is important for native English writers to understand the “lexical bar” or “lexical barrier” which requires them to move from every day, colloquial uses of language into specialized
uses for academic language. In other words, teachers should make students aware that not all language and syntactical structures are appropriate or normal in all settings. If English is not a writer’s first language, they still have knowledge of syntactic variation, but may have different proficiencies and variance. When working with a non-native English speaker, teachers would need to be more explicit in teaching how English is structured. For both native and non-native English speaking students, knowing a word and understanding how to use it in context requires a deep and explicit understanding of the word, including grammatical patterns, spelling, words that commonly occur alongside it, word families, formality of the vocabulary, word parts, synonyms, and antonyms. This type of vocabulary learning must be planned by the teacher so that it can be used appropriately.

In addition, teachers need to be aware of the subtle differences in academic language norms in a range of registers. For example, the genre of literary criticism differs drastically from psychological studies, but both are considered genres that use academic language. It would be important for teachers to explicitly teach their students, native and non-native English speakers alike, about the genre-specific language that exists within academic writing at a level appropriate to students. One way this can be accomplished is by reading a wide range of lexically appropriate texts to increase familiarity.
with norms. However, this is again dependent on a teacher’s understanding and awareness of these differences and their ability to identify, use, and teach useful texts.

While these suggestions are and this research is important, teachers often remain resistant to studying genres and norms as a basis of language instruction. One reason that teachers and students tend to resist engaging with academic writing is because it tends to be long and have complex meaning and syntax. The length can be extremely difficult for ELL students and native English speakers alike, and the vocabulary level within papers can cause difficulty for all students. Understanding not only the vocabulary, but the organization of academic papers (including abstract, sub-headings, and so on) is important because it allows students to handle the developing complexity of language and its use while also learning to internalize writing strategies. However, it is crucial that students learn to read whole texts so that they can learn strategies to interpret the new vocabulary they encounter. When students read whole texts, they should be asked to focus not just on the content, but also on the construction of the text. These studies on genre are helpful not only for teaching reading comprehension and content, but also useful for writing instruction as mentor texts.
Coxhead and Byrd (2007) also compiled a list of common grammatical features that occur in academic prose:

- Long, complex noun phrases with a noun followed by prepositional phrase rather than relative clause
- Long nouns, big words, and words of Latin or Greek origin (as opposed to Anglo-Saxon word bases)
- Lots of different words (versus conversation, which tends to use a more limited and repeated vocabulary)
- Present tense verbs in generalizations and statements of fact
- Limited range of verbs (primarily be, have, and seem)
- Passive voice (without a by-phrase)
- Adverbials to indicate location within the text (e.g. “In the next chapter...”)

This can inform the way teachers discuss academic writing, because they can explain the ways in which these grammatical pieces work together to create an academic text. This contextualized instruction will enable students to create academic texts because they will see on a grammatical level the differences in their more casual writing as opposed to academic contexts. Students must learn “sets” of language, or clusters, so they can recognize the patterns that occur in academic writing that they can mimic.
There are several ways for teachers to analyze academic texts in a way that will assist students. They can select texts to analyze and study, identifying patterns that occur within the texts. Teachers can do the same thing with their students and highlight key features of the texts, which gives students contextualized instruction of academic writing and mentor texts. Teachers can plan activities to draw students’ attention to the language identified in previous procedures for students to incorporate into their own writing. Similarly, they can give their students texts that ask students to find and use the academic language and its structures in sample texts. This helps students apply new vocabulary to appropriate contexts.

Once teachers have taught students how to look for lexicogrammatical features in a text, they need to show students what to do with that information. In other words, students must be able to use, not just recognize, features of academic writing. This means that teachers should assign scaffolded tasks that allow students to practice using what they have learned.

While it is clear that teachers require more training and development of knowledge than is currently provided in regard to learning about grammar and language, the question of how best to teach these things remains. One popular concept is that grammar is best taught when it is contextualized (Myhill, Jones, Lines, & Watson 2012). Researchers investigated whether
contextualized teaching of grammar linked to writing instruction improved student writing skills and knowledge about language. In theory, teaching grammar in the context of writing should make it easier to learn because concepts being taught occur in real-life instances. For example, rather than objectively teaching appositives, a teacher might present her class with this grammar instruction in the context of a real piece of writing and ask them to practice creating appositives based on the example while explaining the prescriptive rules. Contextualized grammar instruction alongside contemporary linguistic theories are more functional, socially oriented, and better supportive of literacy because this strategy shows users how to use the skill they are being asked to learn and draws on what they already know (Myhill, et al 2012).

The National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) has in recent years called for a better integration of functional linguistics with grammar instruction but have simultaneously discouraged grammar instruction, believing it to be detrimental to language development in students. NCTE in a 1985 resolution said:

Resolved, that the National Council of Teachers of English affirm the position that the use of isolated grammar and usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students’ speaking and
writing . . . NCTE urge the discontinuance of testing practices that encourage
the teaching of grammar rather than English language arts instruction. (NCTE, 1985)

In this resolution, it is clear that NCTE does not support isolated or
prescriptive grammar instruction. This push to discontinue a grammar focus
has, despite NCTE’s support of meaningful writing opportunities, created a
standard in which grammar is taught hardly at all. This negative attitude
toward explicit grammar instruction is a result of a long history of grammar
being taught only from a prescriptive point of view, rather than descriptive
(referring to grammar being taught in terms of what it can do, how it
functions in a sentence or larger text, and how it can apply to various
contexts). This type of instruction is indeed detrimental because it provides a
very narrow, decontextualized view of language structure and use. In relation
to this, there have been consistent concerns about ELA teachers’ knowledge
of their subject area, as previously discussed. It is important for teachers to
have linguistic subject knowledge (LSK) because it not only gives them the
vocabulary to talk about language, but to fully understand grammatical
concepts and discuss them with students (Myhill, et al 2012). Having
metacognitive language skills helps teachers better teach grammar and
language to their students in a meaningful way.
The goal of Myhill’s, et al (2012) study was to determine if contextualized grammar instruction linked to writing instruction would improve student outcomes in writing and metalinguistic understanding. For this study, researchers used a mixed method approach, using a cluster randomized controlled trial (RCT) with multiple regression analysis and a qualitative study. The RCT involved 744 students in 31 schools in the south-west and the Midlands of England. Teachers’ LSK and professional background was determined through a questionnaire, and the results were used to form groups. There was also a post-test. An intervention took place in the classrooms and contextualized grammar instruction. The results indicate that both intervention and comparison groups improved their KAL throughout the study. In other words, the students in the intervention group improved more than the comparison group, meaning that teachers had a positive impact on students’ KAL when grammar instruction was contextualized.

It is important to note that teachers in this study often avoided explaining the grammatical elements of lessons because they did not have the knowledge needed to discuss them with students. Teachers also mentioned that they were able to be more explicit with their instruction with the instructional supports, even if they were not entirely comfortable with the
grammatical and syntactic concepts. The integrated materials caused teachers
to notice higher engagement from students. These results show that when
teachers have high-quality materials, students are better engaged, which is a
finding applicable to any content area. In regard to grammar instruction
specifically, the pedagogical principles encouraged informed decision-making
with language. It is clear from this study that contextualized grammar and
language instruction benefit teachers and students alike by promoting
metacognition and deeper levels of thinking.

The teachers’ comments suggest that some of the pedagogical
principles underpinning the planning had significant impact on their teaching.
When teachers better understand how to communicate what they know to
their students, instruction improves; being explicit is one way teachers can
approach this improved communication. The explicitness of the attention to
linguistic features built into the teaching materials and the creation of
multiple opportunities for discussion are the most prominent of the
pedagogical principles, but the emphasis on playfulness and experimentation
as well as on developing repertoires of possibility through making
connections and encouraging informed decision-making are also important.
Because students already have unconscious knowledge of language, it is the
job of the teacher to point out to them what they already know, give them
vocabulary for what they know, and provide them with strategies for using what they know.

A common misconception regarding academic language is that it is more grammatically complex than spoken registers. It is generally believed that academic language has elaborated structures and is more explicit than other types of communication. In reality, academic language and spoken registers of communication are vastly different, but the specific linguistic features of each are different than their stereotypes indicate. These misconceptions lead to inaccurate instruction of both spoken language and academic writing from teachers; a teacher may instruct their students to be explicit in their language when writing for academic purposes, when such explicitness is opposite of what is actually done in the genre. In their research, Biber and Gray (2010) examined the stereotypes surrounding academic writing compared to spoken language.

In the past, researchers held that academic writing was structurally more elaborate than other genres, using longer sentences, main clauses and associated dependent clauses, and subordinate clauses (Biber and Gray, 2010). In addition, academic writing was said to be more explicit because it was decontextualized, unlike spoken language. The enduring stereotype of academic writing being both elaborated and explicit have not been given
specific definitions across researchers, but it is clear that there is a general consensus about these things.

In order to challenge these stereotypes, Biber and Gray (2010) conducted a corpus study comprised of academic research articles (sampled from science and medicine, education, social science, and humanities) as well as textbooks and course syllabi/assignments (Biber and Gray, 2010). These texts were compared to samples from the Longman Spoken and Written Corpus, which include recordings of participants’ conversations over a 2-week period. Researchers compared the grammatical features tagged in the software that were found in both the conversational English and the written corpus samples to determine which type of language was more structurally elaborated and explicit.

It is clear from this comparison that academic language is not as structurally elaborated as the stereotype indicates. Rather than using extensive dependent clauses, academic writing typically uses a more “compressed” style and uses far more embedded phrases (Biber and Gray, 2010). Academic writing is complex, but its complexity comes from the use of these embedded phrases (particularly those in noun phrases), not subordinate clauses, which are characteristic of spoken registers. In addition, academic language is explicit in terms of its reference to specific entities.
present in the text, but the relationships between those elements. In other words, researchers found that academic writing assumes the reader already has some level of expertise in regard to the topic and discipline, so it is less explicit in defining terms or making connections between concepts in the text. This means that teachers need to instruct their students in the specifics needed in order to interpret these types of texts successfully and produce genre-appropriate writing. If a teacher of writing is concerned about their students writing “clearly,” they should teach their students how to achieve that clarity using the previously mentioned linguistic constructions.

Based on this review of literature, a few key points have been made clear:

- Language arts teachers must know more about language and its structures in order to teach writing effectively,
- explicit language and grammar instruction reduces the inequity typically perpetrated in educational settings,
- academic language has been historically misrepresented, and its linguistic features are varied based on the purpose and genre of the text,
• academic language is best taught in context of its purpose --
  grammar instruction is most effective when taught in context of
  mentor texts and authentic writing.
Preface

My sophomore and junior years of college, I worked in the campus writing center. There, I tutored students in writing -- usually one-on-one, but sometimes group projects or special workshops. Many students that came in were in beginning writing classes, like Writing 121. And while a few of the students I tutored enjoyed writing, the overwhelming majority did not. They claimed to be “bad at writing” or “inexperienced,” and often felt anxious at the prospect of needing to type more than a two page essay. They did not feel prepared for the demands of college level writing and struggled to respond effectively to their professors’ critiques.

This preparation, of course, was supposed to be given in high school. I never really considered a career other than that of a secondary English teacher; I loved English in middle and high school, and I was already a tutor in writing, so why not? What quickly became clear in my coursework, however, was that there is fierce debate about what exactly constitutes a rigorous, complete English language arts education. Even more clear was the fact that many colleges and universities only provided degree tracks that were primarily focused on English literature, not linguistics, grammar, or writing. So while the students I tutored likely had experience reading classic
literature, their ability to write at an academic level was lacking because their teachers were not prepared to teach writing in a meaningful way.

As an English or language arts educator, part of our responsibility is to teach students how to effectively communicate with their audience in order to achieve their purpose. Practically, we are expected to meet Common Core standards for the state, prepare our students for testing, and ensure they are equipped for college and career. A primary way teachers can support students and equip them for this diverse set of tasks is by explicitly emphasizing academic language. Academic language refers to a series of lexical and grammatical features typical of writing used in academic settings. Understanding the features of academic language enables writers to achieve the appropriate tone and to be taken seriously by their readers. It is also the type of language expected in college writing and various exams.

You may not be comfortable or familiar with the intricacies of language, making it hard for you to assist your students. This guidebook will help you articulate to students what you expect from their writing and what they need to do in order to be successful. At the end of the day, knowing more about grammar and how language is used gives both you and students more choices -- choices that can be made to create effective, meaningful texts that convey ideas, promote confidence, and are key to success.
Language features

Biber and Gray (2010) compiled a list of academic language features, which will be used as a guide for the purposes of this book. Academic language and its features are different from the features of other genres of language. In this section, the features which are most key and useful to students for their writing will be outlined and explained.

Academic language is based mostly on nouns and the constructions that create noun phrases. This high frequency of nouns supports informational density, which is a key feature of academic text. The ways in which nouns are elaborated and informational density is added will be detailed later, but the following is a brief overview from Biber and Gray (2010) of the functions of phrases in academic language.

- To provide an explanatory gloss for a technical reference. A gloss, or brief notation, is common in academic texts. They are normally marginal or parenthetical, but they also appear as appositives.

Example: “The robusta beans (coffee beans grown exclusively in the Eastern Hemisphere) have a particularly strong flavor.”

In this example, parentheses are used surrounding the explanatory gloss. This allows the author to communicate ideas more efficiently
than if they had used commas. One goal of academic language is to communicate information as quickly and efficiently as possible, and in this instance, parentheses lend themselves to that goal.

- To introduce acronyms. Acronyms are typical in academic writing, but have to be explained and written out before they can replace the item they stand for.

  *Example:* “The Rainforest Alliance, or RFA, certifies the sustainability of growing practices.”

  Notice in this example that an appositive is used to emphasize the acronym. In this instance, commas can be chosen in place of parentheses, which is a typical choice in academic writing.

- To introduce short labels for variables. If a text has variables (particularly common in scientific studies), nouns can be used to describe what the variable represents within a set of data.

  *Example:* “Variable name: weight, length, frequency, temperature”

- To name chemical or mathematical formulas. When formulas are used, nouns can be assigned as a shorthand way of referring to them.

  *Example:* “The formula for a perfect square trinomial is as follows:

  \[(a + b)^2 \quad (a - b)^2 = a^2 - b^2\]
To list items included in some class. If a text references a classification or grouping, nouns are used to name the items within that grouping.

Example: “Roasted beans, which include cereal, burnt, tobacco, and pipe tobacco varieties, are more popular on the west coast.”

In academic language, nouns are also used as pre and post-modifiers. Optional nominal modifiers are common because of their ability to increase text density and complexity of ideas in a concise manner.

While nouns are varied and frequent in academic language, verbs are not. Biber and Gray (2010) found that academic language uses very few lexical verbs (e.g., run, think, grow), and that copula “be,” “have,” and “seem” are much more frequent. In addition, passive voice is normally used in academic language, so while verb use is limited, passive voice is a clear feature in academic language. These non-lexical verbs allow academic texts to read in a more efficient manner, and they help to place emphasis on the content-heavy nouns.

The Common Core State Standards for Writing cover three general modes of writing: narrative, argument, and informal/explanatory. These broad categories, however, can include a wide range of texts; an explanatory text, for example, can include biographies, reports, or how-to guides, all of which have very different genre norms and purposes. The purpose of a
biography is to recount the events of an individual’s life, while a scientific report’s purpose is to communicate the procedure and results of an experiment. In addition, each different text type is constructed in a different way. The chart below from Brisk (2015) details some of the text types within each mode of writing.

To understand how to write successfully in academic settings, students must also understand the differences between these modes of writing. Teachers must help them differentiate between different text types’ purposes, structures, language choices, and audiences.

**What are academic texts?**

It’s common in schools to hear discussions about the importance of teaching students “academic language.” To understand academic language,
however, we have to first talk about the product to which they contribute: academic texts. This guidebook will focus primarily on academic language and will not deal with academic texts in detail, but it is important to understand what the product students are working toward looks like.

Academic texts have a combination of a specific purpose, a narrow audience, and formal style. It’s what we typically expect to see in scholarly articles, journals, and so on, but there are also accessible texts that are academic that we may not automatically think of, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Academic texts are nearly always informational in some capacity; narration may exist as a part of the text, but is not a main feature. Essentially, academic writing is a formal style used by a very small subset of individuals; it is specialized and structurally different from the way we normally write, much less talk. It follows, then, that this specialized genre of writing would not come naturally to even native English speakers -- it’s rarely used, but crucial for academic success at a secondary level. In this chapter, we will examine the structure, audience, and purpose of writing in an academic style.

Academic texts, especially for scholarly contexts, tend to have a discipline-specific structure and often use headings and subheadings as a way to organize information. The structure varies, however, based on the purpose
of the text. In college-level texts, the structure of the genre varies on a
disciplinary basis. A literary analysis will look much different than a
qualitative psychological study, as will its parts. This difference in physical
structure is a result of a different purpose; a literary analysis seeks to
evaluate a text or its features, while a study in psychology communicates
methods and findings. The audience in these examples also differs. A literary
analysis assumes its readers are familiar with the analyzed text, so it tends to
generalize details related to the text and specify the points of analysis. A
psychological study, however, will be detailed in terms, methods, and results.
Often, terms will be defined in the context of their use. Despite these
differences, it is safe to assume that regardless of discipline, the purpose of
academic writing is either to explain a particular point of interest or to argue
for a perspective.

Academic writing, intended for specialists, assumes readers have some
degree of knowledge about the topic and do not need the writing to be
explicit in terms of its context. Readers have a shared context because they
are specialists who know something about the topic of the text. However,
many academic texts are also intended for younger audiences, and while they
may be formatted differently or include more images, they are academic
nonetheless and tend to follow these norms. In this instance, the structure of a text is varied not based on discipline, but on the age of the audience.

In general, the stereotype among teachers of writing has been that academic texts are both elaborated and explicit. In reality, the assumption that readers of academic texts are specialists causes academic writing and the language they use to be grammatically less explicit than other types of writing. This specialized audience allows academic language to be structurally compressed, especially in its use of lexical verbs and density of nouns. The audience must be able to quickly extract information and meaning from condensed text. This assumption that the audience for an academic text is made up of experts causes difficulty for novice readers, especially secondary students who likely have little experience with the genre or formal registers. Academic language is used primarily in informational and argument texts. CCSS requires that both informational and argument texts establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing” (Oregon Department of Education, 2010).
Language Development

One common error made by teachers is thinking that a students’ oral language skills correlate with their written language skills. In reality, learning to write (especially in unfamiliar genres) is similar to learning a new language. Students must distinguish between the differing features present in oral and written language at increasingly specific levels. Spoken English, for example, is produced in real-time, and both speakers and listeners share a context. Because of the real-time aspect, speakers are able to dynamically create meaning through interconnected clauses while speaking.

Interconnected clauses are created through the use of conjunctions (for, and, but, nor, or, yet, so) and insert words (well, yeah, hm, like). Speakers can also refer back to earlier comments and adapt to their listener’s comprehension as they speak. Written language, however, is “static and lexically dense, expressing its meanings through dense passages of writing” (Christie 2012). Students who are native English speakers (or who are very young) have the advantage of using their oral language skills as a resource when learning written language, but students for whom English is not a first language are tasked with developing both written and oral language skills in English. Halliday (Brisk, 2015) found that on average, there is an approximately three year disparity between children’s written and spoken language development.
Students whose social backgrounds and home lives have not prepared them for school are also at a disadvantage (Christie, 2012).

Teachers not only must understand the potential difficulties students experience when developing as writers, but must also understand how language and literacy develop as students mature. Christie (Brisk, 2015) found that children go through four phases of language and literacy development. The first phase occurs when children express ideas using drawings and pseudo writing (or letters that do not necessarily align with correct spelling and grammar). After this stage, children are able to use writing to describe the drawing component better, and writing becomes increasingly complex and long. In other words, language begins to replace drawings as the primary source of meaning, and the text created by students becomes meaning-rich. As children continue to mature, their language resources expand, and they are able to make meaning in new ways; their development as writers allows students to both control their writing and understand different audiences and purposes.

Midadolescent students (normally considered between the ages of 9-14) are at a particularly interesting stage in their writing development; for the most part, students have command of language and can use it to communicate ideas, even though their language strength is primarily oral.
However, students are tasked with communicating in increasingly genre-specific and abstract ways, and writing, not speaking, is used to express learning (Christie, 2012). In addition, what language is written shifts from narrative-focused to expository or argumentative. Students are asked to act as apprentices in specialized contexts (content classes) where language and grammar expectations vary widely. Because specificity and specialization increases as oral representation of learning decreases, students who are strong writers are better able to express learning than their peers who are weaker writers. Students have to navigate learning to express ideas without the benefit of using gestures, tone of voice, or facial expressions like they can use in oral language. Instead, they must use written language to convey the same things less explicitly and within the norms of the genre in which they write. Norms are established based on the purpose of an audience and occur through convention choices and syntax choices.

As specialization increases, maintaining control over language is crucial. Students need to realize that language is patterned, subject-specific, and “uncommonsense” (Christie, 2012). In other words, where content knowledge tends to be commonsense (referring to processes expressed with verbs and participants typically animate) in the earlier years of education, it becomes less so, and it is therefore more difficult to express. Issues with
literacy become more pronounced in midadolescence, and according to one study, are due to a range of factors: reading programs’ failure to explicitly teach literacy through secondary levels, a lack of literacy support in secondary education, and the pressures of growing up (Christie, 2012). It is clear that as students progress in their education, the need for literacy support remains. It is difficult (if not impossible) for students to effectively delve into the complex content they are asked to study, learn, and express if they have not been taught how to gather relevant information, interpret and evaluate that information, and express what they have learned.
Grammar and Parts of Speech

Many teachers rely on grammar textbooks and worksheets as a means to teach parts of speech and syntax. However, those textbooks are overwhelmingly prescriptive and do not lend themselves to teaching students to make authentic, purposeful choices with language in their writing. For this reason, this guidebook will take a more descriptive approach to the parts of speech and syntax. It is more helpful when discussing writing to focus on what language can and practically does do, rather than on the rules typically surrounding a part of speech or syntactic construction. Below is a brief refresher of the parts of speech and syntactic constructions; while not comprehensive, these descriptions will be referenced in later sections of the guidebook.

There are three types of word families (Biber, Conrad, and Leech, 2016) which will be referred to later in the guidebook. The first family consists of lexical words, or words that carry information and meaning in a text (content words). These are the words that we think of when talking about parts of speech. They consist of nouns, lexical verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Below, the form and function of the main parts of speech are briefly outlined.

Nouns
Nouns are commonly defined as “a person, place, or thing,” but defining them is actually much more complex than that. First, nouns take on the affix -s to indicate pluralization. Second, nouns frequently take some kind of determiner (a, an, the). A meaning-based definition for nouns, however, ignores the context in which a word is used. Verbs, for instance, can be nominalized, and nouns can also function as adjectives. Because of these types of language functions, it’s inaccurate to define nouns based on their meaning. For example, “the cotton dress” uses cotton as an adjective for dress, and cotton is not an entity separate from dress. If the parts of speech in this phrase were identified only based on meaning, then cotton would be incorrectly identified as a noun.

Nouns are also either proper or common. These two categories are either definite or indefinite, depending on whether or not they are singular and what types of articles are used with them. Definite nouns refer to a particular, specific entity (“the mug”), whereas indefinite nouns refer to an unknown entity (“a mug”). Common nouns can be further divided into the categories countable and uncountable, which refers to whether or not a numerically defining article precedes the noun (“two mugs”).

Proper nouns are neither countable nor uncountable, and they are always definite and singular as well as always being capitalized. For example,
the proper noun “Argentina” cannot be counted or pluralized. Below is a chart that may clarify some of these concepts.

![Chart showing the use of “a”, “the”, and “Sue” for singular and plural nouns]

*Biber, Conrad, and Leech 2016*

**Verbs**

Verbs are sometimes described as “action” words. Regular verbs’ morphological properties include the following forms:

- Base + -(e)s
- Base + -ing
- Base + -ed

It’s important to remember that, as with all language, these endings and the following ones are patterned, meaning they are repeatable. When teaching academic language, encourage students to look for language patterns in texts and their own writing.

Irregular verbs, which have irregular past tense and ed-participle forms, are split into seven classes. They are listed below.

- A -t suffix indicates past tense and ed-participles, or t replaces a final d on the base.
○ Example: *Spend* becomes *spent*

- A *-t* or *-d* suffix is used for past tense and *ed*-participle, causing a change in the base vowel.
  ○ Example: Base form: *tell*; past tense: *told*; *ed*-participle: *told*

- A regular *-ed* suffix indicates past tense, but an *-(e)n* suffix indicates the *ed*-participle.
  ○ Example: Base form: *sow*; past tense: *sowed*; *ed*-participle: *sown*

- The past tense does not use a suffix, but *ed*-participles use an *-(e)n* suffix instead. The base vowel in this class also changes in the past tense, *ed*-participle, or both.
  ○ Example: Base form: *give*; past tense: *gave*; *ed*-participle: *given*

- The base vowel changes in the past tense, the *ed*-participle, or both, but does not otherwise change.
  ○ Example: *find, found, found; begin, began, begun*

- Both the past tense and *ed*-participle forms are the same as the base form.
  ○ Examples: Let, bet, quit
One form of the verb is totally different from the other two.

Example: Base form: *go*; past tense: *went*; *ed*-participle: *gone*

Verbs are also divided into two classes: *main verbs* and *auxiliary verbs*. Main verbs usually occur in the middle of a clause and determine other clause elements. Auxiliary verbs, meanwhile, appear before the main verb and its meaning. For example, in the clause “I went to the grocery store,” *went* is the main verb. On the other hand, the clause “We could be going to the beach,” has two auxiliary verbs “could” and “be” in addition to the main verb “going.”

There are also three classes of verbs: lexical, primary, and modal. *Lexical verbs* function only as main verbs, and include words like “run,” “jump,” and “think.” These are the verbs that we normally refer to as “action words,” but they really function as the meaning-carrier verbs, or “naming” verbs. *Primary verbs* function as both auxiliary and main verbs, and include “be,” “have,” and “do.” These are the only verbs in this class. Finally, *modal verbs* function only as auxiliary verbs. Modal verbs include “can,” “could,” “shall,” “should,” “will,” “would,” “may,” “might,” and “must.”

A type of verb that is particularly relevant to academic language is referred to as the *copula*. The copula occurs when the verb “be” (am, is, was, were, etc.) functions as a main verb. In academic language, the copula is much
more frequent than in other registers because academic language relies more heavily on noun phrases than verb ones. In other words, academic language relies on the copula frequently, but does not tend to rely on lexical verbs as much.

Adjectives

Adjectives’ function is to modify nouns. They add to informational density when used in a noun phrase. One key characteristic of adjectives is their morphological attributes. Adjectives can be comparative and have superlative degrees (e.g., *strong, stronger, strongest*). These degrees are reserved for longer words that function as adjectives, while shorter adjective-functioning words use *more* and *most* to indicate degree.

There are two main types of adjectives: *peripheral* and *central*. Central adjectives have all of the characteristics which are described below, while adjectives with fewer characteristics are peripheral.

In addition to morphological characteristics, adjectives also have syntactic ones. These characteristics include *attributive* and *predicative* syntactic roles. When an adjective is in an attributive position, it precedes and modifies the head noun of a noun phrase (e.g., “The *confusing* question”). When it is predicative, it modifies a noun phrase that is part of a separate clause element (e.g., “We thought it was rather *interesting*”).
Finally, adjectives have semantic characteristics. Central adjectives modify and characterize the nominal expression (e.g., “The green leaf”), and they are also gradable. A gradable adjective can show different degrees of a particular quality (e.g., “We were very close to leaving”).

Again, many adjectives use multiple characteristics when modifying nouns. In academic language, adjectives are key to ensuring informational density and specificity.

Adverbs

Adverbs can be identified by their placement within a clause. They provide specific types of information, such as when and where. For example, in the sentence “We went quickly into the house,” quickly provides more information about how the subject went into the house. Another feature of adverbs is that they are moveable within a clause; the same example sentence could also say, “We quickly went into the house.” The meaning of the clause does not change when the adverb is moved, but the verb is still defined by it.

Adverbs are commonly described as words ending in -ly. However, there are also many adverbs that do not utilize this ending. There are four categories for the different forms of adverbs: simple adverbs, compound adverbs, adverbs derived by suffixation, and fixed phrases.
Simple adverbs are not derived from another word, and do not use the -ly ending. These adverbs can sometimes be used as other parts of speech, especially adjectives. Simple adverbs include words like fast, already, or quite.

Compound adverbs combine two or more elements into a single word. In other contexts, the words that create the compound adverb are split and are different syntactic constructions. Compound adverbs include words like anyway and nowhere.

Adverbs derived by suffixation are those which use the -ly ending. It is important to note that not all words ending in -ly are adverbs; “motherly,” for example, functions as an adjective, not an adverb. However, depending on the context, the -ly ending and other suffixes can be used as a signal that a suffix has created an adverb. Other suffixes include -wise and -ward(s).

Finally, adverbs may also be fixed phrases, which means they cannot vary in form. They are only used as adverbs in combination with one another, and do not mean anything independent of one another. Examples of fixed phrases include “of course” and “at last.”
Building up noun phrases

Noun phrases are the core of academic language. The need for informational density means that verbs and adverbs tend to be used least, while nouns and adjectives occur at a high frequency in academic language. One key thing you can do to help your students improve their academic writing is to explicitly teach strategies for “building up” noun phrases. This will allow students to write with greater informational density, revise effectively, and produce writing that is appropriate for the register.
Academic text examples

The examples below show not only how academic language is used at a variety of reading levels but the ways in which texts can adhere to the norms of their genres.

Sample Text 1: Sir Cumference and the Dragon of Pi by Neuschwander

While many academic texts appear in a rigid form, they can also appear in unexpected formats that are much more accessible to students than peer-reviewed journal articles. One such example is the picture book *Sir Cumference and the Dragon of Pi* by Cindy Neuschwander.
This text’s format, as a children’s book, is accessible. It uses pictures to engage readers, simple sentences, and appropriate vocabulary. However, in that accessible text, academic language and academic style are used to convey an educational message. Pictures help support the text and provide further explanation of main points.
Narrative is not common in academic texts because it does not normally serve to make a text read more efficiently or create density of information, but in this context, the narrative organizational structure is used by the author to make the topic, academic language, and vocabulary more accessible to readers. Because the target audience is younger than what is typically expected, narrative in this case actually makes for quicker reading; it’s a style familiar to readers, and information is presented in a way in which they are already experts (in other words, students -- the likely audience -- have probably already read many children’s books, so they are experts on this type of text).

Sample Text 2: “Storytelling: A Way to Shine” by San Souci

Targeted for children in grades 2-4, Appleseeds magazine, published by Cobblestone Publications, exemplifies extremely accessible academic topics for younger readers. While a lower-level text, Appleseeds demonstrates many of the same genre markers as its higher-level counterparts, both structurally and grammatically.
In this particular article, “Storytelling: A Way to Share,” San Souci defines vocabulary related to storytelling and the varying purposes of different types of stories. While fairly straightforward, the article is formatted in accordance with the formal register; it uses a series of subheadings and illustrations to support and explain the text while guiding students on how information is organized and giving them a reference for common features. San Souci begins each paragraph in a consistent manner. First, a new vocabulary word is introduced. Then, the vocabulary word is defined and further explained. Additionally, conventions are in alignment with the academic genre. Em-dashes surround prepositional phrases that provide more detail (“Epic poems were told -- often over several nights -- by bards, who might play a musical instrument to accompany themselves”). Relative
clauses are also used (“These are the people who keep old stories alive”) to embed detail and complexity in sentences.

While San Souci’s article is geared for younger readers, it can still be useful with older students. It shows the common features that academic texts share, and it is a good entry point for talking about academic language.

*Sample Text 3: “What Makes a Buck a Buck?” by Moss*
Another example of an academic magazine is *Ask*, published by Cricket Media. This publication is targeted for 6-9 year olds and serves as a quality introduction to academic topics.

In the article “What Makes a Buck a Buck?” information is organized in a way that is common for academic texts, but the illustrations and images are more frequent than in texts intended for older readers. The illustrations themselves are also more engaging to young readers. Additionally, the column format is still present, but because the content of the text is simpler, there are fewer headings needed to organize.
There are also more side “bubbles” with additional information to further explain vocabulary used in the main text; “Cold, Hard Cash” provides more information about ancient forms of currency to give readers context. In higher-level academic texts, it is either assumed the audience knows specific vocabulary, or vocabulary is defined and further explained within the context of its use.

Sample Text 4: “The Power of Placebo” by Brooks
Common academic texts for students come in the form of educational magazines or journals, such as *Muse*, a magazine published by Cricket Media. The publication is targeted for 9-14 year olds and addresses a wide range of academic topics.
This article, “The Power of Placebo,” is formatted in a way that is more typical of academic texts; it uses columns to organize information, and headers are a particularly prominent feature. There are fewer illustrations than texts targeted for younger readers, but the images that are present are captioned with information that expands on or supports the main text. There are still more illustrations than in a collegiate-level text (about one per page). For this age of readers, however, the illustrations make the information more
engaging and provide context. Each image has more information about medications, studies about the placebo effect, and the medical industry, all of which are topics with which the target audience is likely unfamiliar.

This article is also a good example of the use of passive voice. For example, when discussing who uses placebo medications, the author says “Many people unknowingly embrace the placebo effect by visiting doctors who prescribe ‘alternative’ treatments…” Readers are exposed to academic syntax and vocabulary in these types of complex, detailed sentences.

**Why these texts matter**

The important thing to note from these examples is that many students have already been exposed to similar texts, either in school or at home. The academic genre is not usually a completely foreign concept to students; they know it, they just don’t know what they know. Your job is to show them the pre-existing knowledge they have, and then to help students apply that knowledge in a way that will advance their educational opportunities. Furthermore, even the texts for younger readers still have the same genre markers as the texts for older readers, so students with low lexical levels can still engage with meaningful, authentic academic texts.
Teaching academic language

One way to assist students in their understanding of genre differentiation is by using the Teaching and Learning Cycle (TLC) (Brisk, 2015). In TLC, students and teacher process texts in the genre they are examining in order to understand how to independently construct them. The stages in TLC are developing content knowledge, deconstruction of mentor texts, joint construction of text, and independent construction of text. Essentially, the teacher guides students through deconstructing mentor texts to better understand the structure of the genre and the linguistic features. It is key in this stage that the teacher show students how to read a text like writers, hunting for repetition and patterns with the language used in the text. After examining the mentor texts, students and teacher collaboratively construct a sample text of the genre before students are released to create a text on their own. This preferably cyclical process helps students understand not only the specific genre, but how to look for features of any genre in any text.

Below are strategies you can provide students with as you teach and revise academic writing. Remember as you teach to find opportunities for students to practice identifying and manipulating parts of speech and
language choices -- practicing intentional writing and playing with language
are key to students having more choices and creating better writing.

Lesson plan 1

Argument texts - background information

Writers of academic texts present their ideas through argument
because the purpose is normally to convince the reader to align their ideas
with those of the writer. Because academic texts cover such a wide range of
disciplines, these arguments are often indirect; a lab report, for example, does
not directly present an argument, but seeks to prove the validity of its claims
through research, methods, results, and the implications of the results.
Argumentative writing is not a case of “I’m right, and you are wrong,” but of
persuasion, of getting the reader to see the validity of a particular stance or
claim based on reasoning and evidence. Very rarely in academic texts do
authors seek to actually change the reader’s mind. Exceptions exist, of course,
especially in cases of editorials or responses to other academic texts.

Kenneth Burke describes argument as a conversation in his famous
“Parlor Analogy.” The analogy is as follows:

*Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have
long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too
heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the*
discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer her; another comes to your defense; another supports what you have to say; another disagrees. The discussion, however, is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

In this analogy, Burke compares argument to a conversation in which the speaker or writer only participates for a short time. Similarly, academic texts treat argument as an opportunity to refer to other researchers’ and writers’ thoughts and form a claim from them.

When teaching argument, students should be gathering evidence, explaining, interpreting, and digging deeper into the implications of what they find. CCSS for argument writing (W.9-10.1) requires students to “Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence” (Oregon Department of Education, 2010). Students cannot just write an argument in an academic style out of thin air; they need to listen to what others have said on their topic first. Students need to be able to address differing claims,
anticipate a reader’s preconceived ideas, and draw larger meaning from the research they find.

All of these sound like overwhelmingly complex needs for freshmen and sophomores, but remember -- students participate in argument every day. They are constantly forming opinions and claims based on their experiences and what they read, see, or hear. Your task as a teacher is to help students organize their thoughts and present their ideas in a way appropriate to the genre in which they are expected to write.

A simple way to introduce argument writing to students is through yes/no arguments. Present a claim or question that students must side with. Students will have to gather evidence and present it in a reasonable and logical way. There are plenty of mentor texts for students to work from. Below is an example of two authors who took a stance on whether or not America’s food supply is safe.
Is America's Food Supply Safe?

E. coli in spinach, salmonella in peanut butter—a string of recent contaminations has prompted questions about food safety

YES

Americans have one of the safest food supplies in the world. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) works closely with federal, state, and local agencies, private companies, and consumers to make it even safer.

The FDA is always working to protect food from bacterial, viral, and chemical contamination. We use the most modern scientific methods available to learn how contamination occurs and how to prevent it.

We have 625 investigators working out of 20 different offices all across the country who are dedicated to inspecting our food supply and working with food companies to make sure they do everything they can to keep food safe. If we suspect any food is unsafe, we work to catch problems early. We try to find out how the problem started, fix it, and prevent it from happening again.

Our food comes from all over the world. The FDA has inspectors at our borders to prevent unsafe food from entering our country, as well as experts in foreign countries who help ensure that food exported to the U.S. meets our standards.

Besides working with the food industry to prevent contamination of food, the FDA educates consumers to do their part to ensure that the food they eat is safe. This includes cooking food to appropriate temperatures, keeping it refrigerated, and properly handling raw meat, seafood, and poultry.

The FDA works hard every day to ensure the safety of America's food.

—Dr. David Acheson, Assistant Commissioner for Food Protection Food and Drug Administration

(continues)

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Notice that these texts are using facts to support their response to the claim. To convince readers to side with them, both authors lead with a statement followed with evidence. Both focus more on the reasons their side is correct, rather than why the other side isn’t. In the “Yes” response, the author, a government representative, uses sentences of relatively similar
length and density. It’s more important in his response that he come across as professional, calm, and factual. In the “No” response, however, the author uses a narrative to enrich her point. She also uses a far wider variety of punctuation choices, and her language choices are emotionally stronger. While both authors write in an academic style and use genre appropriate vocabulary and syntax, the ways in which they achieve their goals differ. Students can mimic the same things in their own writing; have them pair up to write about different perspectives on a relevant topic. They can be assigned roles (government employee versus researcher for a university), perform research, and practice presenting their arguments in an appropriate way.

Lesson plan 2

Informational texts - background information

While argumentative texts are common in the academic genre, informational texts are also an accessible way to teach academic language. Informational texts are more common in the science disciplines and may be more appealing and less intimidating to students ordinarily resistant to writing. Informational writing is simple to teach alongside argument writing because it also requires students to research and organize according to a specific purpose.
Informational texts differ from argument texts primarily in that they present information without bias. In the “No” response in Lesson Plan 1, the author used narrative to create emotion and strong language to convey her stance. In informational texts, however, an author may use emotional language, but it isn’t to sway the reader. Take this sample text below as an example:

This is no jumble of fluorescent jelly beans—the glowing blobs are actually cells in a mouse’s brain! Brains are made up of tiny cells called neurons. Each neuron has an axon that stretches out, like a wire, to send and receive information, such as how to move your eye, or decode what that eye sees. Scientists believe there are about 100 billion neurons packed into the human brain. The system is so complicated that it’s been nearly impossible to tease out which axon is connected to which neuron and where it binds.

Jeff Lichtman, who studies the brain at Harvard University, is working on detailing all these connections. He and other scientists injected mouse eggs with pieces of DNA material carrying new genetic information. When those eggs grew into mice, that new DNA made their neurons light up when exposed to special light. One change causes some mice neurons to glow blue, another change causes a red glow, and still other neurons become green. Scientists bred the mice together, and the colors blended into hundreds of shades. This photograph is from a small sample of neurons attached to the pathway that carries sound through the ears to the brain.

Lichtman calls the results of this technique a “brainbow.” While it’s certainly beautiful to look at, Lichtman hopes it will be more than just a pretty picture. He can use computers to analyze these color-coded images and find the beginnings and ends of neurons and axons. The project is in early stages, but Lichtman and other researchers say studying the connections in the brain could teach us more about learning disorders and diseases like autism.

“I think anyone who imagines what it must be like to go and see a new planet, that’s exactly what we feel like when we dive into the brain,” says Lichtman. “It’s that feeling of awe, of seeing something we never saw before.”

—Cynthia Graber
The author in this example is clearly excited about the implications of the image. She goes further, however, providing information about the human brain, what scientists know about it, and how brain research is conducted. In the second paragraph in particular the author uses varying sentence lengths and structures to create interest for a topic readers may ordinarily not feel is accessible to them. The first sentence in the second paragraph is a simple sentence (“Brains are made up of tiny cells called neurons”), but it’s immediately followed by a complex sentence that uses dependent clauses to add detail (“Each neuron has an axon that stretches out like a wire to send and receive information, such as how to move your eye, or decode what the eye sees”). In the rest of the short article, the author uses several prepositional phrases (“... new DNA made their neurons light up when exposed to special light”), relative clauses “This photo is from a small sample of neurons attached to the pathway that carries sound through the ears to the brain”), and appositives (“Jeff Lictman, who studies the brain at Harvard University, is working on detailing all these connections”). This wide variety effectively conveys information while remaining interesting.

Students can easily identify these constructions in mentor texts, then look for them in their own writing. Informational writing is a key part of CCSS,
so it’s crucial that students learn how to effectively convey information to their readers while keeping voice, variety, and interest present in their writing.

**Lesson plan 3**

**Passive voice**

Passive voice is a key genre marker for academic texts (Biber, Conrad, and Leech 2016). Learning to use it effectively can help students sound professional and is a strategy they can use both in classroom writing and standardized testing contexts. When passive voice occurs, verb phrases have an agent performing the action specified by the verb. Some passive verb phrases do not specify the agent, but a *by*-phrase is still implied.

Example of a passive verb phrase with a *by*-phrase: “The effects of this study were examined by researchers.”

Example of a passive verb phrase without a *by*-phrase: “The effects of this study were examined.”

If this example were in active voice, however, it would look more like this: “Researchers examined the effects of this study.”

In academic texts, the agent of a clause is usually assumed to be the author or researcher, so there is really no reason to mention them. Passive voice is less disruptive in writing, so it is sometimes necessary when ensuring
writing remains readable. It creates cohesion within the text, while active voice disrupts the text. When looking for passive voice, a giveaway is normally the use of was or were. Get, however, is also a marker of passive voice (e.g., “Millions of people get married every year” and “She got asked if the change was permanent”).

Remember that one way students can become stronger writers is by playing with language. Provide students with sample sentences or short passages. Students can read the samples and identify when passive and active voices are used by highlighting them in two different colors. Provide students with samples from several different genres so they can see patterns in genre norms. Then, have them change all applicable verb phrases to passive and see how it changes the tone and meaning of the passage. They can also do this with their own writing as a form of revision to ensure passive voice is used in academic texts they create.

Lesson plan 4

Noun phrase expansion

In academic writing, noun phrases carry the majority of meaning in a text. Noun phrases can be complexified in two ways: pre and post modifiers. Students can select pre and post modifiers based on the needs of their text and how they want the text to sound. Some modifiers are more flexible than
others in terms of syntactic placement as well; have students practice using a wide range of modifiers in their own writing so they can select what works best for them. The modifiers include:

- **adjectives,**
  - “A special day”

While adjectives are a common way detail and complexity are added, they are not the only way (after all, there is a limit to how many adjectives can fit in a sentence). They should be used only when they will be most effective. In some disciplines, they are used hardly at all.

- **adjective phrases,**
  - “The extremely complex passages *common in conversation* are not used in news writing”

- **nouns,**
  - “The police report”

- **relative clauses,**
  - “The literature *which was thought to be lost forever* . . .”

Relative clauses are also typical of academic language. They are accessible to middle school students in particular as a way of using more complex constructions to add detail in a sentence.

- **participle phrases,**
Participle phrases are a more sophisticated way of adding complexity to a sentence. A relative clause can be easily changed to a participle phrase for a more consolidated, detailed modifier.

- **to-infinitive clauses,**
  - “It was the only way to buy the goods”

- **ing-clauses,**
  - “The soldiers marching smoothly moved . . .”

- **ed-clauses,**
  - “excitement encouraged by clever marketing”

Notice the by-passive phrase in this example too.

- **prepositional phrases,**
  - “Teachers at most elementary schools”

Prepositional phrases are a typical way complexity is added in academic language. They are flexible, have a wide range of uses, and can fit all disciplines’ needs. Prepositional phrases are a modifier students should definitely be able to use.

- **appositive noun phrases,**
  - “The researchers, Coxhead and Byrd, found . . .”

- and occasionally adverbs.
○ “A nearby observer . . .”

You can cover each of these using authentic student (or your own) work. You can also keep an eye out for authentic, common texts that students might not seek out for themselves, like newspaper articles, editorials, recipes, and so on; these different types of authentic texts will help students learn to recognize the language choices an author makes in a text and the effect of those choices. Remember to focus on how grammatical constructions actually function within the context of a sentence, not just their form. Ask students to identify the modifiers they see in a text, then their form and function.

You can also have students practice by making it part of the revision process. When students revise, ask them to select a type of nominal modifier that they want to add to their writing. They can continue adding types of modifiers throughout the year and for varying levels of formality, and by selecting a modifier to practice, you know exactly what the student should be doing in their work. It is also a way to incorporate student choice in writing; students have the power to choose what type of modifier they want to become skilled in using rather than be told what to practice.

Another way you can have students work with noun phrase modifiers is by providing them with noun phrases to play with. Select a series of authentic noun phrases taken from an academic text. Ask students to strip all
modifiers from the sentences. Reread the text using the stripped noun phrases, and have students discuss the effect of taking away modifiers. Then, reread the text with the modifiers included, and ask students to discuss the effect of having this descriptive, specifying language included. Students can also follow this procedure with their own writing.

Below is an example of an original text sample with modifiers compared to the stripped sample. Notice how vague the stripped sample is and how complex the syntax and meaning of the original sample is in comparison.

Original text sample:

Before packaged yeast and factory-baked bread, most leavened loaves were sourdough, born of the interaction among flour, bacteria, and wild yeast floating in the air. That mighty breadmaking combo, called a starter, has quite a history. In ancient Egypt, sourdough fed the workers who built the pyramids at Giza. Today, home bakers can use the Internet to order vintage starters with distinctive tangs from sourdough hotspots like San Francisco, Russia, and Australia. But sourdough bread does take time: A loaf relying on a starter instead of commercial yeast needs to rise at least 12 hours. That’s too long for many bakeries, which now stir in enzymes and chemicals, called bread improvers, to speed up the process. (R. Williams, 2007, p.33)

Paraskevas, 2012

Modified text sample:
Before yeast and bread, most loaves were sourdough. They were born of the interaction among flour, bacteria, and wild yeast. That combination has quite a history. In ancient Egypt, sourdough fed the workers. Today, bakers can use the internet to order starters. But bread does take time: a loaf needs to rise at least 12 hours. That’s too long for many bakeries, which now stir in enzymes and chemicals to speed up the process.

Paraskevas, 2012

In the modified sample text, the reader learns little about the topic, sourdough bread. In fact, the lack of modifiers even causes some of the information to be redundant and incorrect. The clause, “Before packaged yeast and factory-baked bread, most leavened loaves were sourdough,” becomes “Before yeast and bread, most loaves were sourdough,” in the modified version. To a reader, the modified version would make little sense given sourdough is a type of loaf that uses yeast. Notice also, however, that the original version uses a variety of modifiers, both pre and post, to support ease of reading, complexity, and detail.

Noun phrase expansion is also a good strategy to cover with students who struggle with sentence variety. Sentences of varying length, complexity, and density create interest in a text, but they also can create structure and provide detail. In the following example, a relative clause has been
underlined. Pay particular attention to the varying length and structure of this sample, as well as the detail a relative clause is able to provide:

“She chops the *tsuru murasaki*, then mixes in fresh Okinawan tofu and a little citrus-flavored vinegar. The uncooked greens have a slightly bitter flavor that blends deliciously with the vinegar and the creaminess of the tofu. She sets the mixture aside and assembles a dish of two other wild greens -- *yomogi* (mugwort) and *nigana*, a long-leafed bitter lettuce.” (Menzel and D’Aluisio, 2008).

Notice how the author uses the underlined relative clause to add detail to the description of the food; the reader is given a vivid description of the meal’s flavor and the author’s experience without bulky conjunctions. In addition, the author has used a wide variety of punctuation and syntax choices, ranging from introductory phrases and parenthetical nouns to em-dashes and purposeful verbs. All of this creates a reading experience that is both engaging and easy despite the complexity of the information.

Secondary students are expected to write with increasing complexity and variety in their sentences, but they are often stuck in simple sentence construction. Noun phrase complexity paired with punctuation variation are good ways to improve this skill.

**Lesson plan 5**
Consolidation and complexity

Unlike other genres, academic texts are syntactically consolidated. When language is consolidated, meaning is packed to create compound and complex sentences (Derewianka and Jones, 2012). Not only are consolidated sentences a good skill to use on assessments, but they create different kinds of relationships between ideas in a text. Students can combine ideas in order to write more cohesive, less choppy writing. In secondary levels, students often continue to use lots of short sentences built on top of each other to construct meaning because consolidating ideas takes a particular level of skill. Students need to combine and organize thoughts in a way that is both intelligible to the reader and effective.

One way consolidation happens is by turning relative clauses into participle clauses. A relative clause is a dependent clause that includes a finite, or tensed, verb and can also be introduced with a pronoun such as “who,” “which,” or “that”; for example, in “The team that researched the phenomenon,” the team is modified by the dependent clause that researched the phenomenon. While this effectively conveys meaning, it is a bulkier construction that academic language normally uses. A participle clause, however, uses an ing-participle or ed-participle as a main verb. For example, the initial example would instead read “The phenomenon researched by the
team,” where researched by the team modifies The phenomenon. The participle clause is much shorter than the relative clause, and it is able to pack meaning more densely. In addition, participle clauses can be moved around within a sentence, while relative clauses cannot, so they are more flexible based on the needs of a sentence or text. While it is more condensed and efficient, however, the streamlined clause is often more difficult for students to interpret because of its complexity.

One way you could teach consolidation is to give students a text that uses lots of relative clauses, then a version of the same text that uses more participle clauses. Before giving students the participle clause version of the text, ask them to read the relative clause version. Talk with students (and have them talk to each other) about what they notice. Does it read efficiently? Was it easy to understand? After students have discussed their observations, read the participle clause version. Ask students to compare what they notice between the two texts and decide which they like better for an academic context.

The second way consolidation occurs is through the use of appositives. Instead of using a second sentence to explain the first, writers can define a term or add greater detail within a single sentence. One way to think of appositives is as “renamers” -- renaming a noun phrase is their most
common use. Encourage students to rename key concepts in their writing rather than explaining them in one or two more sentences. If student writing lacks detail, adding appositives is also a quick remedy.
In Closing

The most important thing to remember when teaching writing is that *students must write*. I know that seems obvious, but what I really mean is that students must write frequently, must write about things they care about, must write without fear of negative responses or effect on their grade. Your primary job is to make available to students the choices they can make within that writing and to help them better understand which choices coincide with their purpose. Let students see you think, write, and revise, because your model is what will truly reach them and shape them into confident, effective writers.
References


