



# EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING

## Writing Instruction in NYS ELA Modules Grades 3-8

### Overview

The New York State Common Core-aligned 3-5 and 6-8 ELA modules were designed to help teachers build students' capacity to read, think, talk, and write about complex texts. The modules address the reading standards for both literary and informational texts, the writing standards, the speaking and listening standards; the modules also incorporate a contextualized approach to many of the language standards. The modules are designed to fulfill the Common Core vision of students who are truly college and career ready.

### What Influences Expeditionary Learning's Approach

1. The Common Core vision of what it means to be college and career ready as writers.
2. The research base on writing instruction.
3. Recognition that writing is a skill that demands ongoing improvement. Students must develop perseverance and the capacity to problem-solve – both collaboratively and independently – to take concrete steps to improve.
4. Understanding of the importance of using Student-Engaged Assessment (clear learning targets, the use of models, critique, and focused feedback, focused revision and reflection) to support student growth.

### Writing in the Modules: Aligned to the Common Core Vision and to Research

#### 1. Writing is from sources and in a variety of modes

The authors of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) name writing from sources – specifically the ability to analyze and cite evidence from those sources to support one's ideas in writing and speaking – as a critical “shift” required to prepare students for future success. Furthermore, researchers recognize that success in most domains of college, life and careers demands writing skills that, while not identical from one context to the next, often overlap. Students must learn to write flexibly in a variety of modes: “proficient writers [must] adapt their writing flexibly to the context in which it takes place” (Graham and Perin, 2007, p. 9).

#### In the modules

- The majority of writing tasks require students to write from sources.
- Students write in multiple modes: they support opinions with evidence, use evidence to explain their ideas, and tell stories informed by prior learning.
- Students cite textual evidence in both formal assessments and in daily informal activities.
- Focused mini-lessons and activities help students analyze the use of effective evidence and apply this learning to their own writing.

#### 2. Writing is grounded in deep, relevant content knowledge

Students who are college and career ready develop knowledge in a variety of subject areas, work actively with that knowledge and convey and refine their ideas through writing and speaking (CCSS ELA, 2011, p.

7). Research suggests that students' writing is clearer and more developed when students deeply understand the topic about which they are writing. Students who write across the curriculum perform better in the content areas in which they regularly write about what they are learning (Graham, 2008; Graham and Perin, 2007; Reeves, 2004).

### **In the Modules**

- The modules focus on building students' content knowledge, often related to a compelling aspect of science or social studies standards for that grade level.
- Students write about the topics and content that they have studied deeply through reading, discussion, and other activities.
- Lessons follow a coherent sequence to deepen students' understanding of the topic.
- Writing tasks become increasingly complex.

### **3. Writing is strategically linked to reading, thinking and discussion**

The Common Core portrait of student who has mastered the standards (ELA, 2011, p. 7) names the ability to refine thinking and knowledge through writing. Research indicates that reading, discussion, and writing are deeply interconnected: students who have ample opportunity to read, think and talk about a topic demonstrate improved performance in writing (Nystrand, 1998). When students “write-to-think” they clarify their thoughts (Reeves, 2004, p. 190). Student discourse about the content of their reading serves as draft thinking or “oral rehearsal” of the ideas that will go into written work.

### **In the Modules**

- Students read and re-read and engage in multiple experiences around a topic. (e.g. in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, students study the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), use this as a lens to analyze the novel *Esperanza Rising*, and then integrate articles from the UDHR into their Readers Theater adaptation of the novel).
- Students write informally as they learn before moving on to more formal writing. This includes routine use of “Exit Tickets” and structured note taking.
- Strategic questioning and discussion protocols engage students in the thinking processes that scaffold towards effective writing.
- Deliberately interspersed opportunities for reading, discussion and writing all support the recursive nature of refining understanding.

### **4. Writing is frequent, varied and promotes student engagement**

Students who are college and career ready must be able to adapt their communication to meet the demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline – including being able to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds (CCSS ELA, 2011, p. 7). Students learn to better write in ways that meet these demands when they are given diverse strategies and assignments in an environment that supports the developmental nature of learning (Hillocks, 1995). Teachers can better target student needs when they use frequent written assessments (formative and summative) that give them a wide range of useful diagnostic information (Reeves, 2004). And designing writing tasks that engage students in collaboration and address topics relevant to their lives help students be willing to persevere to develop the complex skills of effective writing (Graham, 2008, p.4).

## **In the Modules**

- Students have a wide range of writing experiences (aligned to CCSS W.10), with a balance of frequent informal writing and regular formal writing to prompts.
- Students do formal (academic) writing in every unit (there are 3 units per module).
- Students do both “on-demand” writing tasks (to show what they can do independently) and more scaffolded writing tasks (to show what they can do with support).
- When possible, students write in formats that mirror authentic work and write for audiences beyond the teacher and classroom (e.g. in 4<sup>th</sup> grade Module 3, students write an editorial to an engineering magazine about the importance of simple machines).
- Carefully structured learning sequences support the developmental nature of learning to write.
- Written assessments provide teachers with a range of data to determine support needs.

## **5. Writing instruction is explicit, modeled, and scaffolded**

The Common Core portrait of student who has mastered the standards (ELA, 2011, p. 7) emphasizes the need for students to convey intricate or multifaceted information in an effective and articulate manner (CCSS ELA, 2011, p. 7). Research by Nystrand et al. (1998) found that students made greater gains as writers when they had ample and supported opportunities to talk through their ideas. Hunt (2010) also notes that students benefit greatly when expert writers explicitly model and think aloud as they develop effective pieces. Using graphic organizers and other thinking guides and prompts support students to be strategic writers (Graham, 2008; Graham and Perin, 2007).

## **In the Modules**

- Students are given time to think, discuss, and process information in various formats. This helps them develop clear ideas before structuring them in formal writing.
- Students use graphic organizers to help gather information and plan their writing. They are exposed to a variety of tools, and are encouraged analyze which formats work best for them.
- Students focus on one skill or strategy at a time. Teachers chunk specific standards, techniques and elements of writing with targeted mini-lessons, teacher modeling and practice opportunities for students.
- Students develop essential skills working with language conventions through contextualized, explicit grammar instruction that is tied to the demands of the a specific writing task (e.g. in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, students learn to correctly punctuate dialogue when writing their research-based historical fiction about colonial times).

## **6. Student-engaged assessment practices promote high quality written products**

The Common Core clearly indicates that students must become self-directed learners who can use resources to support their own learning (CCSS ELA, 2011, p. 7). Research by Brookhart and Moss (2008) underscores that student achievement increases when students participate in formative assessment that helps them be metacognitive about their learning: where they are, where they are going, and how to close the gap (Chappuis, 2009). The formative assessment process – including the use of models, critique, and descriptive feedback – helps students become resilient learners who see learning as a process and who can strategize and problem-solve to address new and unforeseen challenges (Brookhart & Moss, 2008, p. 10-12). When students critique models, they develop a clear understanding of the characteristics of quality writing in various formats and for diverse purposes (Graham and Perin, 2007; Hunt, 2010). And as Reeves (2004) notes, developing clear rubrics with students and using those rubrics consistently increases students’ understanding of the criteria for success; this practice yields improvements in the most challenged populations. Descriptive feedback that is focused and specific can have a powerful impact on student learning: “the level at which the feedback is focused influences its effectiveness” (Brookhart, 2008, p. 4).

Students who are taught to identify and correct their own errors are more likely to make long-term gains (Beach and Friedrich, 2006).

### **In the Modules**

- Students participate in ongoing student-engaged assessment (SEA), including the use of models, critique, and descriptive feedback.
- Students work with teachers to develop rubrics and criteria lists, which further clarifies their vision of quality writing and empowers them to gather data on their progress.
- Specific and strategically timed lessons teach students the essential collaborative skills of giving and receiving feedback on their writing, so students can take appropriate action to improve.

### **What is Not Included in the NYS ELA Modules Grades 3-8, and Why**

The NYS ELA Modules Grades 3-8 were designed to help teachers develop students' capacity to read, think, discuss, and write about complex texts. Lessons for grades 3-5 are just 60 minutes long; lessons for grades 6-8 are 45 minutes long. Given these time constraints, the modules reflect strategic decisions to incorporate most, but not all, of the CCSS.

The most basic language standards are addressed when appropriate to the context of a task or lesson. Certain elements of a typical literacy curriculum are not included. For example:

- The modules do not include decontextualized teaching of writing skills (i.e. stand-alone lessons about parts of a sentence or proper use of commas). This type of instruction has its place. But since students' skill acquisition becomes increasingly varied as they progress through the grades, some of this instruction is best addressed in small groups with opportunities for differentiation. Teachers are encouraged to add these specific lessons based on the needs of their particular students.
- The modules do not include explicit instruction on all parts of speech, phonics, decoding, letter-sound correspondence, etc. Some Common Core language standards are addressed in context, rather than as a separate scope and sequence (e.g. additional literacy instruction that includes small groups and guided reading).
- The modules rarely include writing purely from students' imaginations (3<sup>rd</sup> grade has one exception, when students write an imagined scene based on their study of *Peter Pan*). Most teachers have considerable experience with supporting more pure, imaginary narrative writing; therefore the modules strongly emphasize writing from sources.

Taken as a whole, the purpose of the NYS ELA Modules is to bring the Common Core Standards and "Shifts" to life for teachers and students. The writing instruction embedded in all modules reflects this purpose, inviting teachers to envision what is possible, and giving them the tools they need to help students write clearly and effectively about compelling topics.

## References:

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