

Collins Writing Program

Important Information



Online Teacher Resources

Several free resources are available to help you use the *Collins Writing Program*. Go to www.collinsed.com and click on “Free Resources.” New materials are added regularly.

- ◆ Collins paper that is formatted with marked spaces for composition number, FCAs, points, and X’s that remind students to double space
- ◆ Copies of the inside of the *Collins Portfolio* if you need space for more than nineteen entries
- ◆ Revision and Editing Symbols on an 8 1/2” X 11” sheet that can be copied so teachers and students will all use and understand common revision and editing symbols
- ◆ Two classic writing assignments: The “Who Am I Autobiography” – a great activity to begin the school year that provides personal information to help you get to know your students and assess writing skills, and “Letter to Next Year’s Teacher” – a great way to end the year.

Frequently Asked Questions

“I find that the most difficult aspect of Type Three and Type Four writing is selecting FCAs that are not too hard, too broad or, conversely, too trivial. Any help?”

Selecting FCAs is part of the art of teaching—a careful mix of high standards, clear expectations, and knowledge of individual student’s strengths and weaknesses. These are the decisions that make teaching frustrating *and* fun.

Here are some helpful guidelines:

- ◆ Always begin with a content FCA; that is, an FCA that specifies the “what” of the writing. For example, a range of (eight to twelve) facts about a topic, reasons with support, specific details, quotes from the text, and a specific number of comparisons and contrasts are all great content FCAs.
- ◆ Consider a convention FCA (spelling, punctuation, capitalization) to encourage close reading and editing of the paper. The *Essential Conventions Check Mate*™ was created to help teachers communicate clear, specific standards about conventions.
- ◆ If possible, give FCAs with a numerical range. For example: *a four to six paragraph essay* (better than a five paragraph essay—less formulaic); *three to four reasons with support*; or *a short, five to ten word concluding sentence*. Just make sure that the low number is a reasonable standard for the assignment.
- ◆ Repeat FCAs to encourage mastery. Just because students can write a compelling thesis statement once does not mean they will write it again. Most FCAs need to be repeated to become embedded in the students’ skill sets.

FAQs (cont.)

- ◆ Ask students to underline, circle, bracket, highlight or, in some way, indicate where the FCAs are in the paper. Have students underline their thesis statements, circle and number their content vocabulary words, and bracket their reasons with support. These markings help you become a more accurate evaluator, and they also show that the students understand what they have done.
- ◆ Change or differentiate the FCAs for students at different skill levels.
- ◆ For more advanced writers, let the students select one FCA to work on. (See the back cover of the *Collins Portfolio*™ for possible FCAs that students might select.)
- ◆ The less mature the writer, the more specific the FCA should be. *Vary sentence beginnings, lengths and types* is a great FCA for a mature writer, but *two to three correctly punctuated compound sentences underlined*, may be more appropriate for a less mature or motivated writer.

The book titled *Selecting and Teaching Focus Correction Areas*™ extends these guidelines with greater detail and information.

“How many papers should my students complete in a school year?”

While there is no exact answer to this question, the short answer is two Type Three or Type Four papers per month. Writing fluency and skill building require practice—there is no way around it; but some schools have large class sizes that make the evaluation process, even with FCAs, extremely time consuming. Nevertheless, two per month is a reasonable goal. Don't forget that these assignments do not all have to be different. I know teachers who assign one or two ten percent summaries of nonfiction articles per month (see *The Collins Writing Program: Improving Student Performance*™, pages 71-72) plus one other paper without creating impossible evaluation demands.

“What about graphic organizers and prewriting activities? Do they have a place in the Collins Portfolio?”

Most prewriting activities and graphic organizers fall into the category of Type One or Type Two writing assignments. Once completed, these activities help students capture and organize their ideas before they begin Type Three or Type Four writing. My personal choice is to exclude graphic organizers and brainstormed lists from the *Collins Portfolio* because these items make it harder to keep the portfolio organized and neat. On the other hand, some teachers have students staple all drafts for each piece of writing together and include everything. It's really a matter of preference.

“What about assignments that meet the FCAs but have egregious errors in other areas?”

Knowledge of your students' abilities and dispositions is essential when responding to this type of situation. Is the student lazy, sloppy, or trying to game the system? (“If it's not an FCA, you can't mark it off!”) I know teachers who set minimum standards for length, basic conventions (capitals, basic spelling words, basic end punctuation) and refuse to evaluate papers until they are up to a minimum literacy standard, or take off a specified number of points for basic errors. But I try to encourage teachers to be flexible and avoid too many “assumed” or “given” FCAs. There is research that confirms that student error levels vary with the cognitive complexity of the writing task. A basic summary of a relatively easy to understand article will have fewer writing errors than a summary of a difficult to understand article. Sometimes students put all their intellectual energy into the content of their writing and miss errors that are obvious to us. And, sometimes they are just lazy. Push hard for excellence and remember that when students are trying to learn new skills, some of the basic skills will suffer.

Student Writing Sample – Type Four

This sample paper was written by a student in a math class, Jack Howard, who had to send an email to another student, Ed Smith, about Ed's math test. His FCAs were to identify two or more mistakes (worth 60 points), identify one positive on the test (20 points) and use ten or more math vocabulary words that were to be circled and numbered on the left hand margin. Note, we know it's a Type Four paper because it was signed by a peer editor.

Student Writing Sample

		# 7. _____	
FCA	Clearly ID 2+ mistakes	60/60 pts.	Name Jack Howard
FCA	ID one positive	20/20 pts.	Date 12/3
FCA	Use 10+ math vocab. #	20/14 pts.	
			94
			<i>Slow down—you missed some math vocab. Did editor help?</i>
		Title: Email to Ed Smith	
	X		
1.	Terrific job finding the <u>mode</u> in problem one. Great explanation of your work as well. In problem		
	X		
2.,3.	two, you had to find the <u>mean</u> , but your work shows you actually found <u>median</u> . I think		
	X		
	forgot		
4.	you forget that the mean is the <u>average</u> . To find the mean, find the sum of the values and		
	X		
5.	<u>divide</u> by the number of values. Your answer should be 7.2, not 8. In problem 4, you did not		
	X		
		to	
		^	
		simplify your answer and you must get it correct. To simplify a fraction just divide the	
	X		
6., 7.	<u>numerator</u> and the <u>denominator</u> by the same number until the number is as low as they		
	X		
		can get. For example 25/50 is 1/2. You forgot the last step. These problems are easy to fix if you	
	X		
		slow down and read the question to make sure you did everything. Don't end up in summer	
<i>* closing</i>	X		
		school because you rushed – it stinks.	
	X		
	X		
		Edited by Maria Spencer	

FCA

pts. Name

FCA

pts. Date

FCA

pts.

Title:

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

x

x