

# Collins Writing Exchange

Ideas, Tips, and Resources on Writing from Collins Education Associates

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## A Note to Our Readers

### Tackling Informational Writing—Why It's Worth It



Consider most of the writing you have done in the past year: grocery lists, emails to coworkers or employers, lesson plans, instructions for your babysitter, a resume and cover letter for a new job, the list goes on. Unless we are professional fiction authors, a large majority of the writing we do as adults falls into the “informative” category. In *Write Like This*, Kelly Gallagher explains:

*“The ability to inform and explain through writing is not just a skill one needs to make it through school...[students] will be confronted with a job application that asks them to explain why they should be hired, or a boss who demands they produce an end-of-the-year report, or an insurance claim that asks them to explain their side of the story.”*

It’s our job as teachers to arm students with the literacy skills they need to meet the day-to-day and on-the-job demands of adult writing. But contrary to common practice, there’s more to informational writing than biography reports and “how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich!”

#### How to Survive Informational Writing in Four Easy Steps

1. Relate writing to content that students know well—whether personal expertise or key subject matter that has been thoroughly taught and mastered. Fluency with the basic content of the piece helps students to focus on more specific writing skills and deepen their thinking and explanation.
2. Push students to go beyond the procedural “how to” and the mundane book report. Sharpen their ability to inform through a range of assignments—explaining how something works, providing an eyewitness account, outlining the “history” of a topic or detailing connections between two topics, or breaking down and analyzing observations or statistics.

3. Breathe life into informative writing by offering opportunities for students to embed personality and style. The “Survival Guide” assignment below is a great place to start.
4. As with all writing, use clear criteria, exemplars, and Three Step Editing (more on this later) to arm students with concrete strategies and a pathway to success.

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## Featured Assignment

# A Student's Survival Guide

For many students, informational writing can be a drag, as it tends to lack the style and personality of other writing forms, such as narrative, persuasive, and poetic compositions. Traditional “how to” assignments—think “how to build a snowman” and “how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich”—are overly predictable and are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to teaching informative writing. Tap into student interests or your content, give students an opportunity to think more deeply about the information they write about, and encourage a more personal writing style with the assignments below, inspired by Kelly Gallagher in *Write Like This*.

- **Primary:** ["How To"](#) assignment
- **Elementary:** ["Survival Guide"](#) assignment
- **Middle/High:** ["Survival Guide"](#) assignment

<b>Audience</b>	You are writing for your peers or other people who may want to follow in your footsteps and learn from your experience or knowledge.
<b>Form</b>	You will create a numbered or bulleted set of survival tips, written in complete sentences with explanations and reasoning for each tip.
<b>Focus Correction Areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 4-6 tips in logical order/command + reasoning</li><li>• 5 or more specific words (or 5 or more content vocabulary), underlined</li><li>• Complete sentences, bulleted or numbered</li></ul>

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## Strategies That Work

# Three Step Editing

If only students would edit their work before turning it in! While we often blame students’ lack of revising and editing on laziness or carelessness, many students simply don’t know what to look for during this stage of the writing process or what to do if they find a problem.



[Oral reading](#) is a great start to improving revising and editing skills, but as with all writing habits, it’s important for teachers to model what thoughtful revising and editing looks like. That’s where Three Step Editing comes in.

## I-Do We-Do You-Do

Below is a brief summary of the Three Step Editing process, which follows an I-Do, We-Do, You-Do structure. For a more detailed explanation of each step, [see this excerpt](#) from *Improving Student Performance Through Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum*.

**Step One:** The teacher asks for a volunteer paper to be edited with the promise that mistakes relating to the Focus Correction Areas (FCAs) will be fixed, ensuring a high grade. The teacher displays and reads the volunteer's paper, talks the class through an evaluation based on the FCAs, and explains revisions and edits that need to be made in order for the paper to be successful.

**Step Two:** A different volunteer's paper is presented to the class. Teams of peers—not the teacher—evaluate the paper based on the FCAs. The teacher checks to make sure all teams understand the FCAs and how to evaluate the FCAs by calling on teams to explain their evaluations.

**Step Three:** A third volunteer's paper is evaluated by individual peers. The teacher calls on individuals to share and explain their evaluations.

In addition to modeling the revising and editing process, Three Step Editing has other important advantages:

- Almost always ensures student success by demonstrating exactly how papers will be evaluated (graded)
- Repeatedly reviews content embedded in the paper
- Identifies and troubleshoots common writing problems in real time
- Builds student accountability
- Speeds up the feedback process and minimizes the need for lengthy individual comments on papers

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### Paper of the Month

## The Wonderful World of Group Writing

This month's paper is another example of how to inject life into informative writing. In this short assignment, students were asked to explain something they are good at in a way that would convince others to give it a try. FCAs were to begin their writing with "Welcome to the wonderful world of \_\_\_\_\_," develop three reasons why this activity is "wonderful" and include feelings, and use varied sentence beginnings.



**2. Recalibrate your implementation of Collins Writing.** Administer this quick [self-survey](#) at your next faculty meeting and reach out to your favorite CEA consultant for help in filling in the gaps.

**3. Offer your staff a Collins refresher class.** Purchase [Dr. John Collins'](#) anywhere, anytime video course, [Introduction to the Collins Writing Program](#).

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