Middle school students enjoy writing persuasive essays, especially when they choose topics that relate to school, home, friends, and personal issues. Children are experts at “working” adults in order to obtain a forbidden privilege such as going to the movies during the week; middle school students tell me that their persuasive techniques include buttering up adults by being extra polite and completing chores without adults nagging them.

“Once I sense my mom is on my side because I’ve been, like, totally helpful, I ask the big question,” Jason explains. “Persuading her is easier,” he adds.

However, I find that I can’t assume that writing a persuasive essay will be easy for all middle school students because developing a thesis statement and writing solid arguments to support the thesis is more demanding than the verbal buttering-up technique many employ.

I stand in front of a seventh-grade inclusion class. We have studied a persuasive essay mentor text and how to negotiate criteria. “Turn to your partner,” I say, “and discuss what you think should be included in the content of a persuasive essay. Try to think of three suggestions and jot these on notebook paper.” Silence. I try again, and this time I model. “I think the essay needs a title that lets readers know what the topic is.” I jot “Title that announces topic” under content and invite students to chat with their partners.

Thoughts race through my mind: I did give lots of support during the mentor text lesson. It’s on the chart. They’re not connecting. Quickly, I decide to think aloud and model how I use ideas on the chart to develop content criteria. Tension
dissolves. And from these students I have learned that when the genre is unfamiliar or they have experienced it only once, I, the teacher, have to model the process for them, even if it’s a process they’ve been through before. If students feel they can’t or are reluctant to risk suggestions, then the teacher steps in and responds to their needs by providing the support that can prevent them from feeling insecure or frustrated and avoiding the content of the lesson.

Use the lessons for a persuasive essay to teach all levels of students how to develop an opinion about a topic and convince others to side with them. You’ll find a lesson on exploring and finding topics, studying a mentor text, brainstorming a list of arguments for and against an opinion, and planning the essay. Revision and editing lessons include transitions between paragraphs and paragraphing a persuasive essay. Note that I’ve put the lesson on leads and endings for persuasive essays (Lesson 4) before having students plan because I wanted to introduce them to techniques they’ll need and use during planning.

As you explore the lessons where students create plans, compose a first draft, peer-edit, and revise the first draft, I’ve offered suggestions for integrating the revision and editing into Lessons 7 and 8 and for circling back to lessons on specific nouns and repairing run-on sentences. Play with my suggestions and adapt them to your schedule and your students’ needs.
Lesson 3: Negotiating Criteria for a Persuasive Essay

How This Helps

I’m coaching Ms. Golding, a novice teacher. We’ve met once and today I’m observing her class. Ms. Golding tells her sixth-grade students that today they will draft their persuasive essay. Hands shoot up. “How do I know how many arguments to include?” Jill asks.

“How long?” “How many arguments against our side do we include?” “Does spelling count?” As the questions pour out, I notice that tears well up in Ms. Golding’s eyes.

“You can draft tomorrow,” I suggest. “For today, pairs can read and discuss the persuasive pieces on the bulletin board.”

Later that day, Ms. Golding and I meet and discuss negotiating criteria. As a novice teacher, Ms. Golding was unfamiliar with teaching criteria and had planned to develop a rubric for grading students’ final drafts. She had not expected to be bombarded with unanticipated questions.

An overarching purpose of this lesson is to work with students and develop specific guidelines for writing a persuasive essay before the planning stage. Knowing the criteria they will be expected to meet enables students to do a better job of planning and drafting. In addition, students will return to the criteria to peer-evaluate first drafts and then improve them before writing a second draft.

Invite Students To

- Reread the “Analysis of ‘Summer: 15 Days or 2½ Months?’” chart.
- Discuss possible criteria with a partner.
- Negotiate criteria using the headings and details on the analysis chart; OR
- Read and discuss the criteria handout.
- Weigh in on the grading percentages.

What You Need

- Give out writing folders.
- Post the chart with the students’ “Analysis of ‘Summer: 15 Days or 2½ Months?’” that you created in Lesson 2.
- Be prepared to create a new chart with students, “Criteria for a Persuasive Essay.”
- Set up a clipboard with dated sticky notes.
Students’ analysis of the analytical essay suggests content criteria for their own essays.

Reread “Analysis of ‘Summer: 15 Days or 2½ Months?’” and discuss possible criteria with partners.

As three students hand out writing folders, I display the chart titled “Analysis of ‘Summer: 15 Days or 2½ Months?’” and reread the sections out loud.

Analysis of “Summer: 15 Days or 2½ Months?”

State the opinion of this persuasive essay.

The writer believes that the traditional school year with 2½ months summer vacation is better than year-round model.

Arguments Against Year-Round School:

- Uses statistics—1980–95% of schools dropped year-round—powerful.
- Research—costs a high school $157,000 more for year-round—schools can’t afford this now.
- Address cons in second and third paragraphs. Very specific—year-round means higher pay for teachers; disrupts learning; gives exact schedule; utility bills up; no difference in students’ learning.

Arguments For a Long Summer Break:

- Quotes an expert—Dr. Scales—to show why camp and a long summer are good for children.
- Starts addressing arguments for long summer break in third paragraph. We liked it ending with the points for traditional school calendar: scheduling vacations; benefits of camp and other activities; maintains health and children’s development.

Ending

Repeats the lead or introduction. Does not add anything new.

Point of View

3rd person

Chart: Students’ completed analysis of “Summer: 15 Days or 2½ Months?” from Lesson 2
“Take a piece of paper and head it with your name and date. Then turn to your partner,” I say, “and take about five to ten minutes to discuss the elements of a persuasive essay that are on the chart. Then decide on content criteria for the essay you will plan and compose. Which elements of a persuasive essay do you think we should include in our own?” Clipboard in hand, I make the rounds and listen to pairs’ discussion.

**Tommy & Jack**

“I know we need a lead,” Tommy says to Jack, “but I’m not sure what kinds are for persuading.”

“Don’t know either,” says Jack. And I make a note to explain that we will have a lesson on leads that work for persuasive pieces.

**Kendra & Kyla**

“We definitely need points for, and we have to make those against not work,” Kendra says to Kyla.

As I circulate, I hear students discuss the headings on the chart. The scaffolds are working, I think.

“Take a few minutes to jot suggestions for content criteria; work with your partner.”

**Cecily & Jay**

“There’s not much choice,” Cecily says.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Well, we need all of these things [chart headings]. No choice.”

“You’ll have choices with your topic, the kind of lead and ending you develop, the arguments you select and the way you position your arguments for and against the topic, the facts you include, and the experts you quote.”

“Can an expert be a student?” Jay asks.

“Sure, as long as they have experience and expertise. Now let’s develop the criteria.”

I begin by suggesting that the title should introduce the topic of the essay, and write this on the chart. I then ask them to volunteer other criteria, writing them under the appropriate categories after the group discusses, accepts, or rejects recommendations. We decide not to include using statistics and quoting an expert, even though these were in the mentor text, because we have little time for research. I finish by adding two conventions, paragraphing and varying sentence openings. Here’s what students negotiate:
After establishing the criteria, I either ask students to work in groups to suggest percentages for each section of criteria or assign percentages and have students offer adjustments. In addition to posting criteria for students while they plan and draft, I suggest giving them a copy of the criteria to place in their folders.

**Closing Routine**

I compliment the students for their participation in transforming elements of a persuasive essay into criteria for writing and evaluating. I encourage them to turn to the brainstormed details for their topics to see if they reflect these criteria before handing in their writing folders.
Who Got It?

The questions that follow, along with your observations and notes of partner discussions and students’ brainstorming and sharing, will enable you to decide who requires more experience with this kind of mentor text.

Could the student identify elements of a persuasive essay?

Did the student make the transition from the mentor text to setting criteria?

Did the partners suggest relevant criteria?

Did the student participate in negotiating criteria? Percentages?

If students have difficulty negotiating criteria for a persuasive essay . . .

• Adjust your expectations so students experience success. Adjustments can include:
  □ requiring a specific type of lead and ending or giving them two choices;
  □ including two to three points for and two against long summer vacations; and
  □ suggesting how to position their arguments.

Once students see that they can write a persuasive piece, you can return to this genre and increase the expectations.

• Have a peer expert work with them and think aloud to showcase the process.

• Reteach for a small group and model the process, showing them step-by-step how to turn elements of a persuasive essay from an analysis into criteria.

If students can negotiate criteria for a persuasive essay . . .

• Search the Internet and/or interview an expert at school or by telephone for data to use in their essay.

• Have them continue to discuss their topic with a partner, brainstorm, and collect questions from their partner that enable them to add more details to their brainstorming.

• Discuss, with a partner, how they plan to position their arguments, lead, and end their essay.
Additional Ideas for Negotiating Criteria for a Persuasive Essay

- Invite students to study the structure of a newspaper editorial and develop criteria for this type of persuasive piece.

- Give students two to three persuasive essays by former students (remove names). Have them read these essays and discuss why the writers’ way of positioning the arguments was effective or ineffective. Finally, ask students to talk about how they would state their findings in criteria.
Quick and Easy Professional Study Suggestions

Take fifteen to twenty minutes twice a month to meet with colleagues and choose one item to discuss each time you meet.

1. **Discuss leads and endings.** Figure out the positives of your minilessons on leads and endings for persuasive essays by sharing what worked. Then troubleshoot and bring up areas that you feel need additional thought. Gather suggestions from colleagues.

2. **Bring sample first and second drafts.** Bring a first and second draft that illustrates excellent improvement and one where the student made a few token revisions. First, celebrate successes and then turn your discussions to figuring out ways you can help students who complete minimum revisions.

3. **Discuss transition-sentence lessons.** Share with colleagues your lesson on transition sentences and discuss what worked well and what didn’t help students. By exchanging experiences and ideas, you can explore alternate ways to teach students how to make effective transitions between paragraphs.

4. **Share accommodations for English language learners and writers who struggle.** Discuss ways you adjusted the criteria and your lessons for students who require accommodations to experience success. Which lessons did you emphasize? De-emphasize? How did you help this group succeed?
Summer: 15 Days or 2½ Months?

The final bell rings. It’s the last day of school, and summer has finally come! Students don’t have to think about school for at least another 2½ months. That is the way it should always be. Schools should continue using the traditional calendar and not a year-round schedule. There are numerous downsides to year-round schooling. It has no positive effects on education, it adds to costs, and it disrupts the long-awaited summer vacation.

Contrary to the well-accepted belief, year-round schooling has no constructive impact on education. Most year-round schedules use the 45-15 method: 45 days of school followed by 15 days off. Because of this, there are many first and last days of school. All those transitions disrupt the learning process. Also, there is no evidence of higher test scores. Due to that, many schools that change to year-round schedules end up switching back. For example, since 1980, 95 percent of schools that tried the year-round schedule changed back to a traditional calendar. It is obvious that changing to year-round schooling does not help students; therefore, why is the change necessary?

Like any other facility, keeping a school open requires a great deal of money. When a school changes to a year-round schedule, the costs skyrocket. Keeping school open in the middle of summer requires air conditioning, and that adds significantly to the school’s expenses. The usual utility bills grow because of the additional open-school time. Finally, teachers must be paid for all the weeks they are working. With all these factors, the cost of keeping schools open becomes immensely high. For example, a high school in Arizona had a cost increase of $157,000 when they switched to year-round schooling. Some schools may not be able to handle such increases, and other schools that can handle these expenses could be doing better things with the money. Is year-round school really where the money should go?

An important part of a child’s life is summertime. With year-round schedules, students would hardly have any time to relax. During the 15-day breaks, they would be thinking about their quick return to school. It would also be difficult to coordinate family vacations with parents’ work.
schedules. Similarly, children would not be able to go to most summer camps. One expert, Dr. Peter Scales, says, “The biggest plus of camp is that camps help young people discover and explore their talents, interests, and values. Most schools don’t satisfy all these needs. Kids who have these kinds of [camp] experiences end up being healthier and have fewer problems.” Obviously, the summer is crucial to a child’s learning and development. Why should this invaluable part of a young person’s life be taken away?

It is evident that year-round schooling is not the best option for the school calendar. There is absolutely nothing wrong with the traditional school year. Why change something that works so well? The final bell rings. Let’s make sure this bell means that the “real” summer vacation has come.