

# Study Guide for Teaching Argument Writing



*Teaching Argument Writing, Grades 6–12: Supporting Claims with Relevant Evidence and Clear Reasoning* focuses on helping teachers develop in their students the specific skills needed to write an effective argument and challenges us to deeply engage the students in our classrooms.

As Hillocks emphasizes throughout his book, critical and reflective practice is essential to good teaching. The best practices are honed in collaboration with colleagues through both discussion and practice. We hope you will consider forming interdisciplinary teams for this study group, as there are many points of entry for teachers of all core disciplines. The intersection of argument with forensic science, law, literature, and original research invites applications in a variety of courses.

Each chapter in this book has clear content objectives, but we are also interested in helping teachers hone their pedagogy in ways that can be applied more broadly. To that end, for each chapter we are providing discussion questions as well as suggestions for action. We hope you will experiment with these actions in your individual classrooms and then report back to your group to share results. It is this kind of collaboration and reflection that can lead to a lively and rewarding Professional Learning Community.

## Guiding Questions for the Introduction

Hillocks uses Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow or optimal experience as a starting point for this book because he believes creating flow experiences for students is the cornerstone of all effective pedagogy. Without it, meaningful learning will not take place. Read over Csikszentmihalyi's definition of flow on page 3.

### Discuss and Reflect

- » Think about a moment in your life, past or present, when you have had a “flow experience.” Brainstorm a collective list of those experiences and what factors were necessary to create it. If you are meeting in a group, share some of those experiences.
- » Discuss the findings documented by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (pages 3–5) about the disconnection between school and flow experience. Consider some tasks that students engage in in your classroom on a regular basis. How do you think your students would rate their levels of pleasure, confidence, and absorption in these tasks?
- » Look at some sample objectives from a lesson from your classroom. How do they align with the criteria for creating a flow experience? Are there certain lessons or units which engage students more than others? Can you identify the characteristics of these units or lessons which help create a flow experience for students? How might you revise a less effective lesson to create the conditions that contribute to flow experience?

### Things to Try

- » Ask students to take a survey in which students rate their levels of pleasure, confidence, and absorption in certain tasks in your classroom. Bring the data back to your group and discuss.
- » Bring a sample lesson or unit from your classroom that you would like to modify to align more closely with a flow experience. Using the criteria listed in the introduction, work with colleagues to create at least one task that could create a flow experience for students.

# Chapter One: Solving Mysteries to Teach Simple Arguments of Fact

In this chapter, Hillocks has outlined ways to use mysteries and an inquiry-based approach to instruction to help students construct arguments of fact. This approach correlates directly with high levels of engagement and builds skills students need to craft an argument from existing data.

## Discuss and Reflect

- » Has anyone in your group used mysteries in the curriculum before? If so, with what goals?
- » What were the strengths and weaknesses of your unit? What concepts did students grasp easily? With what concepts did they struggle? How would you rate the level of engagement?
- » What are your concerns as you begin the teaching of this chapter?

## Things to Try

- » See the “Note on Pretesting” on page 39. Look at the list of criteria and try to agree on a shared list of objectives. Feel free to adopt this list in its entirety.
- » Using the example on page 39, create a pretest scenario that will engage your students. As a group, implement this shared pretest and meet to discuss the collective data. What are your students’ weaknesses? What skills might need extra scaffolding?
- » Following the guidelines in this chapter, introduce the scenarios suggested. Schedule a weekly meeting to discuss successes and areas of concern, both in terms of pedagogy and student objectives.

# Chapter Two: Teaching Simple Arguments of Judgment

This chapter focuses on the content of arguments of judgment. Although Hillocks walks you through the unit step by step, teachers often ask for more support around helping students succeed with small-group work. In order for this unit (and most teaching!) to be successful, we have to ensure the students

have a clear understanding of the task as well as guidelines for working together. Before you begin this unit, consider the following questions.

### **Discuss and Reflect**

- » What has your experience been with small-group work and adolescents? What are the benefits to this work? The pitfalls?
- » Brainstorm a list of specific strategies that have worked well, as well as areas of concern with small-group work.
- » Read the “Tips on Using Small-Group Discussions” on page 65. Have you used these strategies before? Are there any new strategies which you would be willing to introduce?

### **Things to Try**

- » Focus on 2–3 specific strategies for success with small-group work and implement them during this unit. At the end of each day, make some quick notes in your planner on how the small-group work went. If you are teaching multiple classes, note the differences between each group. Share your findings and best practices with your colleagues.
- » Observe one colleague’s classroom during their small-group work. Act as a constructive friend, jotting down observations of the group work and the strategies used to optimize this class time. Debrief within the week and then share findings with larger group.

## **Chapter Three: Writing Simple Arguments of Policy**

This chapter challenges teachers to encourage students to generate original data, rather than use secondary sources to drive their inquiry, research, and policy projects. Hillocks notes that the Common Core asks middle school students to “conduct short research projects to answer a question” and high school students to “conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question or solve a problem.” What are your own research practices in your classroom and your school?

## Discuss and Reflect

- » What opportunities do students in your school have to generate and interpret data? Brainstorm a list of opportunities and lessons where students have had this experience.
- » What kinds of research opportunities do students have in your current school curriculum? Would you consider these projects inquiry-based? How might you tweak these projects to reflect the kind of inquiry-based practice Hillocks offers in this chapter?

## Things to Try

- » Using Hillocks' outline as your guide, collaboratively plan an investigation with students. After each day of implementation, jot notes reflecting on the day and debrief with colleagues.
- » Coauthoring a piece of writing is an effective tool for modeling thinking and writing habits. Hillocks offers tips on this process at the end of the chapter. Try this with your students, especially if this type of writing is a new genre for them. Use Hillocks' suggestions, balancing suggestions from a variety of students with your own input. Share this process and product with your colleagues.

# Chapter Four: How Are Judgments Made in the Real World?

This chapter is a crucial one for those teachers, perhaps in the upper grades, who are interested in taking on the more complex nuances of argument in Chapters Seven, Eight, and Nine. Hillocks breaks down the kinds of judgments people make each day and demonstrates how this thinking forms the foundations of argument—and by extension the warrants and backing of arguments.

## Discuss and Reflect

- » Choose a court case (or a story that is mythic, an act of terrorism, or a satiric poem) and discuss a warrant that could apply. Then, brainstorm a list of criteria for this warrant and some examples that would meet each criterion.
- » Discuss the necessary background knowledge you believe students will need for this kind of extended thinking. What evidence can you use to determine student readiness?

## Chapter Five: Learning to Make Judgments Based on Criteria

In this chapter, Hillocks demonstrates how teachers can engage students with real-life problems to generate a set of criteria to defend. Through this work, students can connect with current events as well as apply a set of criteria to real-world issues.

### Discuss and Reflect

- » Brainstorm a list of possible topics for which students could generate a list of criteria. See examples on page 131. Also, see Hillocks guidelines for choosing an appropriate problem on page 143.
- » Choose one from this list and brainstorm a list of criteria together in your group. After brainstorming, generate another list articulating the kinds of inferences students will have to make.

### Things to Try

- » Using either one of the topics from the list you generated in your study group or the Giraffe Award used in the beginning of the chapter, take students through a specific case together. If you choose your own topic, see Figure 5.2 and create several other cases so students can test their criteria.
- » Use the sample case on page 128 and, using the small-group techniques from Chapter 2, conduct this lesson. As an extension, consider staging a courtroom case and assigning roles to each student. This incorporates the judgments generated from the criteria.

## Chapter Six: Developing and Supporting Criteria for Arguments of Judgment

In this chapter, Hillocks broadens the task of making judgments and asks students to defend and extend their thinking. See Chapter Four for some background information, which will help facilitate the discussions in the activities outlined here.

## Discuss and Reflect

- » As a group, brainstorm the definition of courage. As Hillocks suggests, generate two or three scenarios that would be good examples for your students to discuss in order to help *them* define courage.
- » After reading Chapter Six, discuss the kinds of judgments and assumptions you think are most prevalent in our society today. Which of these judgments do you see as the most dangerous? Why?
- » Watch the final debate in the movie *The Great Debaters* referenced on pages 146–148. How does it help illustrate Hillocks’ point in this section? How might this clip enhance students’ understanding?

## Things to Try

- » Take students through the process of discussing the scenarios and generating a definition of courage. If you have written additional scenarios, consider using those as well. Compare the small-group discussions in your classroom with the transcriptions in this chapter. How are they similar? Different? Brainstorm with colleagues how to maximize this discussion time for students.
- » Compare the definitions of courage in each of your classes and with other teachers’ students. Are there similarities or differences? How might you reinforce or tweak the strengths or weaknesses next time?
- » Discuss how you might use the methods Hillocks outlines in this chapter to guide students through the process of defining additional concepts or qualities that may be frequently referenced in media (e.g., heroism, patriotism). Consider collaborating to write scenarios for students to discuss for this additional classroom work.

# Chapter Seven: Teaching Students How to Make Literary Judgments

In this last chapter, Hillocks challenges the status quo pedagogy in which teachers assign homework but do little to teach the higher-level skills needed to comprehend it or write about it effectively. Throughout the chapter, Hillocks demonstrates how the work described in his previous chapters connects with literature-based inquiry.

## Discuss and Reflect

- » Hillocks writes, “A common assumption is that merely assigning a great many works, contributing background information about the elements and structure of the works and the periods in which they were written, and then explaining what these works mean will somehow produce students who are active interpreters of literature themselves.” (See page 177.) Have you ever made this assumption in your own teaching? Discuss together.
- » If you have tried any of the activities in this book, have you seen evidence of growth in inferential thinking? Can you give evidence which may be helpful for your colleagues?

## Things to Try

- » Using Hillocks’ guide and examples in this chapter, select a concept and a text to which you could apply it. Try to collaborate with at least one other teacher as you do this.
- » Consider Hillocks’ guiding philosophy: “. . . the unit is not designed to elicit specific information but rather to enable students to bring complex knowledge to bear on complex problems and to write thoughtfully and effectively about those problems” (185). Think about guiding questions that could help you enable your students to do this with the concept and text you have selected, above. Then, design an inquiry-based unit around the concept.