



Common Core Benchmarks K – 12: Informative / Explanatory Writing

The Common Core Writing Benchmarks are tools for instruction to help all students write proficiently. The benchmarks have been created by teachers, for teachers – and ultimately for the benefit of students.

We all know that “teaching to proficiency” is a tall order and a huge undertaking. Teachers need to have a clear picture of what “proficiency” in independent text-and-topic-based writing looks like (*and what it does NOT look like*).

Therefore, the Vermont Writing Collaborative has created this set of K – 12 text-based informative writing benchmarks. They are an annotated set of student text-and-topic based writing pieces, reflecting the criteria in the Common Core standards for informative / explanatory writing.

Some Frequently Asked Questions About These Benchmarks

What is a benchmark?

A “proficient” benchmark is a piece of student writing that reflects what a proficient piece of writing for a specific instructional sequence, for a specific grade level, might look like. If a piece of writing is “proficient”, it will show understanding of the content being taught, in a well-organized and well-articulated way that makes that understanding clear to a reader.

Why are these pieces “text and topic based”? Why is knowledge important?

There is increasing recognition that what students know is directly related to their ability to read and write proficiently. This is reflected in the Common Core literacy standards’ deep emphasis on integration of literacy into academic content areas, especially literature, science, and social studies.

In addition, there is increasing recognition of the common-sense understanding that no piece of writing can be proficient without a deep understanding of the topic, appropriate to a given grade level.

Keeping this in mind, these pieces have been chosen to give teachers good examples of what “proficient” can look like (and does not look like) *within substantive curriculum content in actual schools*.

N.B. Proficient writing about text and topic can look many, many different ways – and it should! These benchmarks do not, and cannot, show examples of all of these. However, its intention is to give teachers and students both a more accurate understanding of what text-and-topic based writing *can* look like, and also examples that teachers could adapt or learn from for their own schools’ curricula.

Why is “independence” in the writing important for these benchmarks?

Good classroom teaching always needs to focus on clear instruction. In the case of content-and-text-based writing, the classroom instruction is on multiple levels:

- students are being helped to *read carefully and accurately* about substantive content that matters
- students are being guided in *building strong and deep content knowledge*, from the texts and from discussion and other activities

- students are being given instruction in *writing structure and craft*, so that they can demonstrate understanding of that knowledge

Classroom instruction is *necessary* for kids to develop knowledge (that’s why we have a curriculum!). It’s important for teachers to recognize just how important that content classroom instruction is in producing thoughtful, insightful, clear writing. Other sorts of instruction matter, too, of course – like how to build, or structure, a particular piece of writing. Sometimes, in the course of instruction, specific writing skills are taught or even scaffolded for students,

However, ultimately, for all teachers, the goal of all this classroom instruction is that students develop new knowledge and how to get it – then to *internalize* how to show / use that knowledge in a clearly organized, accurate piece of writing that reflects the standard (for that type of writing) for that grade level.

N.B. This does NOT mean that all classroom writing is or should be independent – far from it. What it does imply, however, is that teachers need to know what students can do independently when they *have* internalized all the important content knowledge of a given topic, *and* are constructing and communicating understanding of that knowledge in a proficient piece of writing.

Therefore, it’s important that these benchmarks reflect what “proficient” looks like when a student is *writing independently about knowledge and understanding that he/ she has developed*.

The Nitty-Gritty: What’s In the Benchmarks?

Organized by grade level

The benchmarks are organized by grade level, beginning with K and continuing through Grade 12.

Levels of proficiency

For each grade level, there are 3-4 “proficiency levels”. These are intended to show teachers (and students) what range of proficiency for a given set of pieces might look like. Each of these has both a “clean copy” and an annotated copy”.

Annotations

All of the annotations have been created to illustrate the elements of the informative writing standard at that grade level, *within the context of the particular content the writing is meant to demonstrate*.

In addition, there are some annotations which address the language and conventions standards. These are not meant to be complete, but do give a sense of how well each piece of writing reflects proficiency in the language standards.

Reflection of classroom curriculum

All of the pieces in a given set come from the same curriculum unit / instruction. This is intended to make it clearer for teachers to see what “proficient” in that particular unit of instruction might look like, as well as what a range of writing might look like (including some common error patterns).

In addition, for each set of writing benchmarks there is a short but specific description of the content goals of the unit, plus a bulleted list of specific activities / strategies that the teacher used in the classroom within the unit.

How These Benchmarks Might Be Useful

First, teachers would be able to use these student-written, text-and-topic based “proficient pieces” as a critical first step for themselves as individuals to get a *clear sense of “what proficient looks like”* at each grade level, in each writing type. They can use this as a baseline for determining “proficient” for their own curricular units.

Importantly, these benchmarks will help teachers look *formatively* at their students’ work as they make instructional decisions about what sorts of ongoing help and instruction their students need.

In addition, the benchmarks will make it possible for teachers to *fairly assess* their students’ writing. Assessment is a critical step in determining what instruction students need.

Finally, the benchmarks will be an invaluable resource for school wide or district wide *professional development* for teachers, both experienced and beginning teachers.