Related questions from parents are clumped and bulleted in sections below.

* **Please send home strategies on how to write an essay and strategies used for summarizing.**
* **So many ways of teaching the students how to write with different kinds of tools, graphic organizers, BCR, old-fashioned outlines that the kids don’t always master one before learning another—this can cause the student to freeze at the time they need to write that they may revert to BCR minimum. Are there examples of the different methods that parents can learn and follow to help the kids? Also seeing their work will help.**
* **How to prepare/support parents in order to support the kids**

I’m so glad that our parents want to help in such specific ways, and I know the English department will be encouraged when I share this with them, too! It’s true that there are many acceptable ways to organize writing and that organization patterns vary from task to task. However, at the middle school level, we can prepare students to use straight-forward patterns of organization before they branch out into more creative structures. The basic structures our department supports for analytical and narrative writing are as follows:

**Analytical /Argument** (responding to a prompt asking a student to explain a concept developed in a given text):

RACECE paragraph structure—(R) Restate the prompt, (A) Answer the question, (C) Cite an example from the text, (E) Explain how that citation proves the answer, (C) Cite a second example from the text, and (E) Explain the second example

NOTES: Students are encouraged to blend “R” and “A” into the same sentence (the topic sentence for the paragraph). Also, citations can vary between direct quotations and paraphrases, but by the end of 7th grade, students should be able to embed short, quoted phrases into their own sentences which are otherwise composed of their own words. While in 6th grade a student might resort to writing, “At the funeral, Jesse says, ‘Mr. Burke, your daughter was my best friend, and she changed my life.’” In contrast, by the end of 7th grade and increasingly through the 8th grade, students should be working to embed quotes further, like this: “At the funeral, Jesse explains to Mr. Burke that Leslie was his “best friend” and that she “changed [his] life”. The RACECE document has been distributed in past PTA meetings and is always distributed at the articulation nights, and I am pleased to send it to Mr. Davis to pass on to the PTA and any other interested parties.

**Narrative** (telling a story):

* Exposition
* Rising Action
* Climax
* Falling Action
* Resolution

NOTES: In advanced classes, more complex concepts are added, like “inciting incidents” and “denoument”. Also, in 8th grade, students increase their study of varied story-telling structures, including things like altered time structure and author’s use of flashback. As students get older and also more advanced in their skills, we encourage them to branch out in varying their writing structures from the basics given above to new structures that bring different effects on the readers. Students may always resort to RACECE or the basic narrative structure listed above, but when advancing towards high school writing after mastering basic structures, they can branch out into varied, non-traditional formats.

**Basic Essay Structures and Notes on Different Sections**

While there are basic essay structures just as there are basic narrative and paragraph structures, essay structures do also change based on the needs of the particular assignment. Teachers are to talk through the logic of arranging paragraphs for a given essay in logical ways, ways that serve the reader in being captivated by and easily following the writer’s arguments. For example, the 7th grade students just studied three variations of comparison-contrast essay structures, all of which are valid and useful:

1. Introduction
2. Similarities
3. Differences
4. Conclusion
5. Introduction
6. Subject 1 (i.e. details about product 1, an Xbox)
7. Subject 2 (details about product 2, an iPad)
8. Conclusion
9. Introduction
10. Feature Comparison (physical features of both dog subjects)
11. Feature Comparison (personality features of both dog subjects)
12. Feature Comparison (costs involved in caring for each dog subject)
13. Conclusion

These structures would vary based on how many points of comparison are being made; the number of body paragraphs would vary accordingly. Each body paragraph, in a basic format, could use the analytical/argument structure of RACECE, increasing the citations and explanations based on how many pertinent points need to be addressed in each given paragraph. Students may list short, related citations and then explain the set afterwards and only once.

The introduction and conclusion paragraphs are difficult for many students. Here are some ideas that teachers and parents can use to help students compose them:

Introduction Paragraph:

* Start with a “hook”—a catchy statistic, quote, or concept that links to the main idea of the essay
* Follow the hook with a transition sentence or two that gives general information about the topic (this could be the setting and main characters and conflict in a book or background information about the subjects to be discussed in the body)
* End with a thesis statement—a one-sentence argument that the writer will prove in the essay. Any lists in the thesis statement should match the order of the paragraphs below (i.e. physical features, personality features, and costs involved).

Conclusion Paragraph:

* Summarize all body paragraph points, being sure to re-address all major concepts in different words. All through the middle school years, we would with students to avoid unnecessary repetition of specific vocabulary, and having to think of new words to say what one already said is challenging for any writer. We encourage thesaurus use in the classroom during in-class writings.
* End with a link back to the catchy opening to tie everything together in the whole essay. For example, if the essay started with “Diamonds are a girl’s best friend”, it might end with an allusion to Marilyn Monroe or *Gentleman Prefer Blonds*, like “Most American women will enjoy a diamond of quality cut, karat, clarity, and color, even if they’re brunettes!”
* **I would like to see writing assignments come home so that I can also help strengthen my child’s writing ability.**
* **6th grade—current students do not bring home work for assists in development by family.**

I will definitely ask my RT colleagues from other schools about how to handle this. I complete support the idea that parents should be able to see their children’s writing and, of course, have welcomed any specific parent request. English teachers keep a portfolio of each student’s writing in their respective classrooms, and students are given multiple opportunities each quarter to reflect on their own writing progress as it is evidenced in the portfolio. Students set goals based on the teachers’ comments on their writing (both hand-written and highlighted or circled on rubrics). We hesitate to send the portfolios home at large because too often, it does not come back, but we have sent them home “on lend” to parents who request them. We have also gone through portfolios with parents who come to the building to peruse them, and often times, the portfolio is used at a teacher’s own initiative during parent conferences in order to show parents the patterns in their children’s writing. While I do work through this issue, please encourage individual parents to contact their children’s teachers and request some time with the portfolios.

* Is English teacher editing every student’s writing? Are we done with peer editing?
* Is every teacher editing every student’s writing? Re-writes based upon edits? Parents need to see work in order to help or accelerate. Home review should be an option.
* How many drafts do students do for the four common tasks per quarter?

English teachers are given the autonomy to make decisions about these particular issues in cohort groups and are encouraged to use a variety of methods of checking for writing skills. English teachers assess quick-writes (2-5 minutes in length), on-the-spot (one draft) paragraph and essay writing at any length, and, of course, also those ten-day in-class writing projects that involve the media center for research, extensive planning packets, rough drafts, peer editing, teacher comments on the draft, editing, and re-writes (and anything in between!). These lengthy projects usually occur once a quarter while the others are practiced in different forms throughout the rest of the quarter. English teachers are encouraged to have their students writing something daily, be it on the sentence level, the paragraph level, or the essay level. Teachers circulate during class and collect short writings informally to check for understanding and to clear up misconceptions. For lengthy writings—all common tasks, in particular—teachers give verbal feedback (at least) during the writing process and written feedback via hand and/or rubric annotation on any submitted draft. At present, the 8th grade classes are studying peer editing and are practicing this skill set in a focused manner. The lower grade levels tend to use peer editing in a less intense and less formal level although students are often required to evaluate their own writing and set goals for improvement (during quarterly-plus portfolio reflection, a county standard).

* Many students do not even have the hand-writing (penmanship) and spelling to write essays for the PARCC.

From what I understand, students will be typing on the PARCC, not writing by hand. They will be provided a note-taking function on the computer, and I’ve heard that the students will also have scratch paper to use, but we have not received all the pertinent information regarding these details yet. I hope to learn more by spring.

* English presentation was too much about assessment. I wanted more info regarding what/how teachers are instructing differently in new curriculum. I was convinced after the first reading sample that the PARCC is challenging. I wanted more on what’s new in classroom—in all grades, all levels.
* Needed more info on how staff is instructing to meet needs of student who only knows how to write BCR’s and read short texts.

I, too, was disappointed that we didn’t get to discuss the ways the teachers are working to prepare students for life (and testing) via the curriculum. There is no new curriculum this year, but I had dedicated a section of my presentation preparation to the work that we English teachers are doing in the classroom, and the time given for presentation did not go as I’d planned. Inside the distributed packets, you will find a list of the teaching and student learning focuses that our department is studying and applying in the classroom, including:

1. Practicing close reading with two-plus texts of related themes.
2. Asking questions that necessitate synthesis and analysis to answer.
3. Designing questions that compel students to read for deep, implied meaning rather than compel them to skim the text.
4. Providing direct instruction on writing argument and evaluating claims.
5. Explicitly teaching how parts of texts work together and affect each other.
6. Modeling how to analyze the relationships between significant ideas and supporting details among texts.

Unfortunately, you didn’t get to see where I was going with the Amelia Earhart study, but these six focuses of our department this year align with the Amelia Earhart study, so that’s where I was going with connecting the PARCC to what we’re doing in the classroom…to real life! ☺ Each month, I am training the English teachers in the methods of teaching these skills. So far this year, we have studied how to teach close reading, how to draw inductive reasoning from our students, and how to motivate students to read more often and for greater lengths of time by offering student choices in literature. We have decided to create and use at least two close readings each quarter and to specifically design our classroom discourse and writing assignments towards challenging students to inductive reasoning and synthesis of multiple texts.

I so appreciate your questions, concerns, and support and know that they come from a group who cares very deeply about not only our own children but the betterment of our society. Please do write with any follow-up questions that remain, and I will work on finding out how and if other schools are sending home writing assignments at any and every stage of the writing process.

Sincerely,

Chrissy Brandt