Best Practice with the "Text-Based Essay" MCAS Question

from Test-prep Shortcuts to Teaching for Understanding

Writing Argument, Essay and Narrative based on a Reading Passage

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MCAS 2.0 has a new question type called a "Text-based Essay."

Basically, this writing piece is a literary analysis piece of writing. It begins in the early grades with just a one or two-page writing expectation, which is a stretch for many lower grade level children, and then moves to as much as a six-page writing piece at the later gra

The Text-based Essay now replaces the separate writing piece of the "long composition" of grades 4, 7 and 10. The long composition was separate from test reading passages. Grades 4 and 7 were narrative. The tenth grade composition was a literary analysis piece in which students were provided a general question that they could use any text they'd had in classes to use to respond to the question. The question was along the lines of "Write about a character whom you believe is a hero, and explain why you feel he or she is a hero." Often, students wrote lengthy pieces, now confined to six pages.

Now the Argument writing piece, the Essay writing type, and the Narrative writing type

of the Standards are referred to as Text-based Essays in the MCAS 2.0 test. The grade level facets of the particular writing type are the criteria used to assess the student's writing.

The writing on the MCAS 2.0 tests are called "Text-based Essay" in the question, but are also called in the question "Essay" or "Narrative."

One way to look at the Text-based Essay is that it's an extended Open Response question type of writing. Our "old," "legacy" MCAS asked students to write on one of the Standards in relation to a reading passage, such as on what are the Central Idea and Supporting Details of a passage. The Open Response question answer was short, just a paragraph so many teachers just taught students to begin with the answer to the

question, often asking students to turn the test question into the first sentence of the Open Response question answer. Then students were told to give just tow or maybe three examples from the text, then provide reasoning, or simple conclusion.

For the legacy MCAS test, then, some teachers drilled students with an acronym called "CER," Claim, Evidence, Reasoning. A multitude of acronyms were created for varied schools. Teachers said students weren't all that excited about doing this practice, practice, practice on CER (one teacher told me his students "hated" it), but then students were happy when the practice made it easy to do this on the test, and this one teacher was happy with his test scores results.   So this is an example of test-prep work, but not necessarily an example of great teaching that will develop students' good understandings and ability to learn to do great writing and love writing that will help them with future good writing. CER is test-prep writing that only really prepares students for the old Open Response Question.

"Text-Based Essay" on the other hand, is an example of how this next generation of tests with PARCC and MCAS 2.0 are moving away from simpler types of questions that many teachers over time learned how to make short-cuts for, or used test-prep strategies for. Other examples of this – in addition to Open Response question writing shortcuts -- are the multiple choice reading questions. With the old legacy MCAS, students only had to select the one best multiple choice answer on a Reading Standard, for example, it would be either central idea, close reading, inference, or using context clues for vocabulary. All one had to do was make a good guess of the five possible multiple choice answers. Now with the "Next Generation" MCAS 2.0, students have to actually prove that they understand the correct answer by selecting text evidence, the Part B question. (Some teachers have found that Part B provided text pieces help with Part A, as students change their minds when they see the Part B evidence.)

MCAS 2.0 moves us to the next step up in quality of teaching and learning by making it harder to use simpler test-prep simple strategies that don't really develop well good reading comprehension, literary analysis, and good development of student writing.
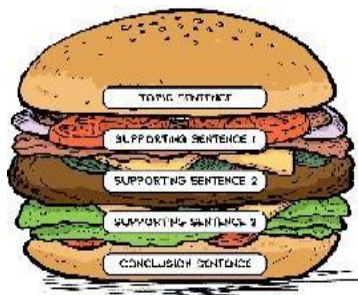
Another example of test-prep strategies, used for the Open Response question writing, are teaching writing using the Oreo cookie model, or the very widely popular national "Hamburger" writing model. While these ways to teach writing may be ok for helping more struggling students, most students are not learning good writing development.   Several years ago, Community College (otherwise known as junior colleges, the 2-year colleges) made a huge outcry because they were claiming that students were coming to them not knowing how to write. This charge came out at about the same time that teachers were bringing in the formulaic

writing of the Hamburger or CER type of writing, simply writing for the test, and not for learning to write well in general. While we're all for helping students do well on MCAS, for a sign that our students are learning, we're now moving to an era and a new type of test in which such old test-prep help won't help students with many of the new test questions, and won't help students really learn to be able to read well or to write well. It's a new era. Best practices now need to be built into year-long practice and developed well with students. Short-term test prep won't help with today's tests.

So how do we help students with learning how to read and how to write well? The Text-based Essay question tests both reading and literary analysis understandings and writing ability. It's not a simple task for which one can create an acronym, formula, or cookie or other food image.

The Text-based Essay question links the Standards Writing types to test reading passages; therefore it's now a test of both Reading Standards and of the Writing types.

First, in preparation to respond to the Text-based Essay, the student must be able to answer the reading question asked. On the common Text-based Essay question of "What is the central idea and supporting details," the student must be able to analyze the reading passage to determine the central idea. So all the reading work over the school year must work on central idea and how you know, what the evidence of supporting details are. This is basic needed reading and literary analysis understanding.

In Standards Reading instruction, the teacher first provides instruction on how to read for central idea and supporting evidence, or whatever the most commonly assessed or needed Reading Standards are. In the "gradual release of responsibility" mode of instruction, first the teacher teaches the concept, and uses simpler material to help students understand the concept. Then the teacher provides gradually more and more challenging examples, and then moves to having students practice doing this on their own, in activities, not tests. The test of ability to understand central idea and supporting evidence comes later, and if students are not seen as proficient on that in-class assessment, the teacher works on this essential key reading skill in a different way with students, to develop mastery of this important reading concept.

In practice, always as reading is done, the teacher asks in a passage, a poem, a non-fiction piece, a film what the central idea is and how do you know, text evidence. Students should argue this point, debate it, work together in small groups or pairs to work together to figure this out. Different levels of reading must be given to different students so that text complexity is appropriate to the student reading level, or provide different types of reading – love poems, current sports articles, news articles that may appeal to some -- or different sections of the class text used at the time for students to wrestle with on their own, and to help others with uncovering central idea and

supporting evidence. Reading and re-reading for evidence and taking the time for this is needed for all students to master the Standards skill.

As just one example of material that takes students time to find Text Evidence is provided in the passage below, the sample reading passage of "The Fast and the Furriest" for Standard 1, Close Reading Text Evidence.

So, in responding to the Text-based Essay question, we teach the process in class **multiple times** before the MCAS test, to develop automaticity with the format.

The first step is to have the students read the passage carefully to get a sense of the passage, and then read the Text-based Essay question. Then the student re-reads the passage, looking for the central idea and supporting detail as one reads, now reading just to determine central idea. The student uses the "scratch paper" provided with the test to write down legibly the central idea one finds. Then the student goes back into the passage and locates supporting evidence, jotting these down. Then the student is ready to write.

However, a big change is that for the good writer, we teachers must understand that writing is thinking. Writing stimulates thinking. As we write, new thoughts come to us. These are better thoughts than we had while just brainstorming ideas in advance of writing. Experienced writers often say that they don't know what a character they're writing will do next, what turn the character will take. This isn't mystical, it's just that new ideas come from our heads when we write.

Therefore, the student both in preparation for the MCAS test, and during the test, won't simply copy what he or she has jotted down in notes. Big change here. In fact, as the student has looked back in the passage for the central idea and for supporting evidence, he or she may modify one's original thinking about what the central idea is, or change the thought for a new thought, as one reads more carefully. Jotting down ideas are just a first step in getting ideas down. As one writes, these ideas change.

For our most struggling students, it's acceptable to have students simply jot down central idea and supporting evidence, then copy into a simple writing piece. However, many struggling students ARE capable of using the writing process, and we should try to help all students with this in practice work.

So as the student begins to write, the first reading, the look at the question, the jotting down of notes, are all just first steps. These steps move away as only the first steps when the writer then begins to write. The writer at the higher level of writing ability won't even look back at those jottings, because one

becomes more involved in the writing piece itself. Looking back into the passage to verify one's thoughts is fine to do, but one focuses mainly on getting ideas out and on the paper. The writer at this time doesn't stop to worry about spelling or getting the one best word right, transitional words or phrases, or sentencing or punctuation. Just beginning the writing comes now. Getting the ideas out is the first step in writing. One at this point can't write the perfect final piece of introduction, evidence, conclusion, because one doesn't yet know what these are. Often the last step in writing is writing the introduction. The conclusion emanates from what one has written. Few if any writers write the final piece as the first piece. If one does, it's not the best work, it's simply fulfilling the bottom basic of an assigned task.

This writing process approach now becomes automatic for the student, because the student has practiced this in class, to begin the Text-based Essay by stating what he or she sees as the answer to the test question, which may be the central idea. Then the student provides evidence of this. But as the student writes, he or she may well recall text information that he or she didn't jot down in notes, to prove one's point. This is why we don't use the notes, the jotting, as the evidence, because the brain goes deeper when writing. The first writing of what the central idea is may well change. In fact, during the practice sessions, a student can see in the original jottings how far one has come away from those initial jottings in the actual better ideas of the writing. The student may see how far one's thoughts on the central idea have come in being modified from the initial jotting, or even changed, in the actual step of writing.

From thinking of this process — which is the writing process that helps students become engaged in writing and to become good writers – we see how constraining the formulaic writing such as CER is. With CER-type writing, there's no room for ideas to expand and develop, little or no thinking is going on. This is limiting for all students.

After writing the draft of the Text-based Essay, the writer goes back to re-read what is written. In practice on this writing, the student will have learned either from peer editing with a peer looking at one's work, or self-editing from reading the piece aloud to oneself, or from teacher comments, the writer learns good sentencing, correct punctuation, correct spelling (no spell-check is provided on the computer test!!), and introduction, transitions, and conclusion. So these may be added in in handwriting. These can be easily corrected when we all move to computer testing in 2019, so all students must learn to first draft and then revise and edit on the computer. Through the class practice work, the student learns too how to expand on ideas to meet the six-page length looked for on the test. However, the Text-based Essay writing is assessed on quality of ideas appropriate to the reading passage, and quality of writing more than

length, so writing that's accurate to the text and well written if less than six pages will get a better score than one that's padded with extraneous information or ideas.

The best thing about using this process to develop the Text-based Essay writing, is that this process is on writing the three Writing Types of Argument, Essay and Narrative. For these types, the specific facets of Introduction, Claims and Evidence, Transitions, and Conclusion are required, and these writings are related to a reading passage. Correctness with "conventions" of spelling, punctuation and sentencing is now counted in the twelve score points total. For Narrative, the student first practices in class with other students to brainstorm possible next steps for a story to take, and then uses the narrative writing facets of descriptive detail, dialogue (the words that are spoken), character and plot, all seen in the normal class of fiction reading, and practiced along with fiction reading.

Teachers often ask, how can I teach all these Standards? When we see how the Standards and the MCAS question types are all tied together, and tied into reading comprehension and analysis and the writing process, not only are Standards linked, but students develop the excellent literacy they need for college and for life, expanding their worlds through ideas, communication ability, and analysis.

OLD SCHOOL WRITING

MCAS 2.0 Practice tests:
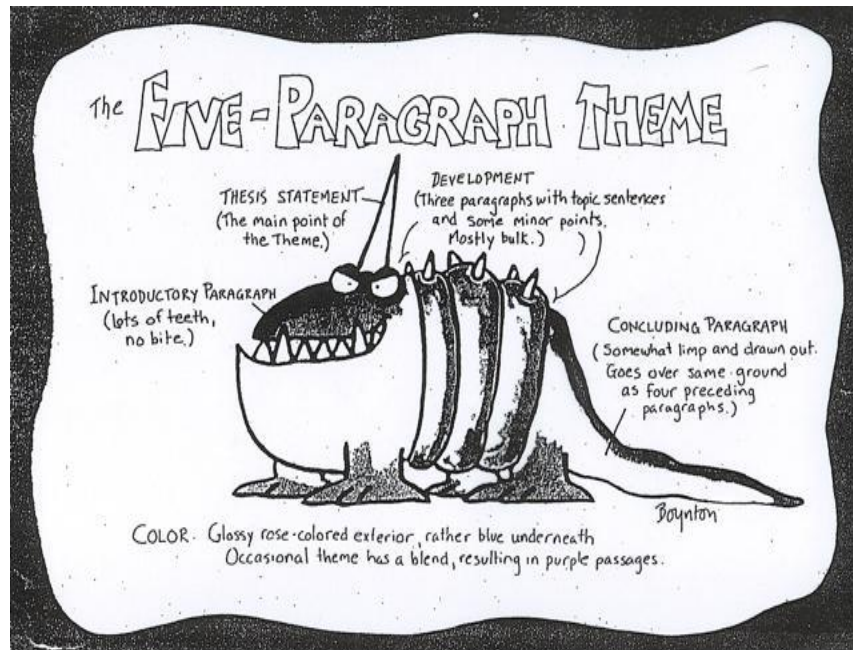
http://mcas.pearsonsupport.com/student/   (PARCC practice tests)

http://mcas.pearsonsupport.com/resources/student/practice-tests-ela/MCAS_2017_Gr7_ELA_PT_WEB.pdf

Reading passage: "The Fast and the Furriest," seventh grade passage, first passage

Just as an example of the need for finding text clues in a reading passage, a teacher may use this seventh grade reading passage for students to answer the question, "Who is Howie?" There are four fairly subtle clues to who Howie is in this passage. Students can work together to figure out who Howie is, for an exercise in Standard 1, Close Reading.

OREO COOKIE WRITING (Opinion Writing)