

Beyond the “Plop”: Using Quotations Effectively in Argumentative Writing

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Teacher: “I see you included a quote as evidence.”

Student: “It’s perfect!”

Teacher: “How does it back up your claim?”

Student: “It supports what I am saying in my claim.”

Teacher: “But how?”

Student: “It speaks for itself.”

Sound familiar? The above dialogue represents a typical conversation teachers have, see, and hear in classrooms as students develop arguments. For the past two years, the Upstate Writing Project partnered with schools around the state, collaborating to help students learn to write effective arguments as part of the National Writing Project’s College-Ready Writers Program. Throughout this effort we have worked with middle and high school English teachers, co-planning and co-teaching lessons in an effort to help students master argumentative writing.

Argument is not new. One common framework for talking about argument dates back to the early Greeks and Aristotelian argument. Books like *Everything’s an Argument* (Lunsford & Ruszkiewicz, 1999) have been used in college composition courses for nearly two decades. With the recent adoption of the Common Core State Standards by many states and subsequent controversies, the teaching of argument in middle and high school was brought to the forefront of conversations about the English language arts curriculum. In the latest version of the South Carolina College and Career Ready Standards for English Language Arts (2015), argument is included in the reading and writing standards across grade levels. Teaching argument has become an expectation in our middle and high school classrooms and should be. After all, argument is an important part of our everyday lives. For many of us, when we talk about sports with friends, we make an argument. When we talk about books or movies, we make an argument. When we advocate for a cause we care about, we make an argument. Respectful argument is how we begin to see the world from another point of view and helps

us make important decisions using available evidence. If one of the goals of school is to create an educated citizenry who can advocate on their own behalf, argument would seem to be an essential component of education.

Over the past two years, the Upstate Writing Project has worked extensively with teachers to find ways to effectively teach students the fundamentals of argument writing. One area where we see students often struggling, whether they are 7th graders or 12th graders, is integrating quotations into their argumentative pieces. We have come to recognize the “quote plop” as a typical technique less skilled writers use as they develop their craft. What does the “quote plop” look like in a piece of writing? Here is an example from an 8th grader, which seems to be fairly typical. The student’s claim is that schools should start later, and he is writing his response based on an article from *Scholastic Scope*, “Should School Start Later?” (O’Neill, 2014). The following excerpt is the second paragraph of his essay:

According to a National Sleep Foundation Study, 59 percent of sixth through eighth graders and 87 percent of high school students don’t get the recommended 8.5 to 9.5 hours of sleep a night. Jilly Dos Santos, a senior at Rock Bridge High School in Columbia, Missouri, said she was “ten minutes late to school every day because of the early start time and it was disruptive.”

The paragraph definitely has evidence, taken directly from the reading provided. But how can a teacher move the student from listing evidence to introducing evidence, citing the source (and perhaps mentioning the credibility of the source), and then connecting the evidence directly to his or her claim?

After some research, reading, and much trial and error, we found several effective strategies that helped us move students from the “quote plop” to using evidence effectively to support a claim. We introduced these strategies over time and gave students ample opportunities

to practice using each strategy in their own writing before moving onto another. With each strategy, we taught a mini-lesson (or several), modeled the strategy, and then asked students to immediately incorporate the technique into their own writing and revisions. This enabled students to gain some initial practice with each approach and emphasized the importance of revision in writing.

Strategy 1: The Quotation Sandwich

The quotation sandwich is a simple strategy to help students learn to “sandwich” their quote within ideas (Graff & Birkenstein, 2010). We used this technique to help students use the quotes they found to support their claims and incorporate the quotes into their arguments smoothly.

The quotation sandwich is simple and effective. First, we had students identify a quote that supported their claim. Next, we explained how we were all going to sandwich the quote (Figure 1). We then gave students an opportunity to practice each part, essentially modeling and writing a paragraph together.

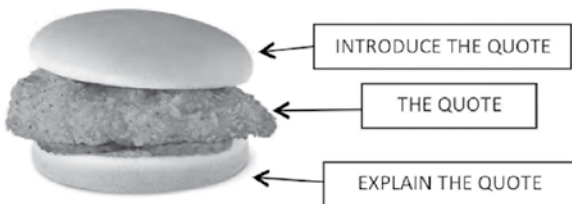


Figure 1: The Quotation Sandwich

For some of our students, this was not a new concept. Many students understood that they needed to introduce the quote, but they weren’t sure what to do after the quote. A key for success was modeling each part. One example we used in a classroom of English 2 students centered around a set of articles about celebrities selling photos of their children to tabloids. Students read a short article on celebrity baby photos and were asked to make a claim based on the information presented in the article. Some students argued celebrities had a right to control who received their children’s photos and others argued that this was just another way for celebrities to make money and violated the privacy of their children. We then wrote a paragraph together, choosing a claim to use as an example. In this case we argued celebrities should not be allowed to sell pictures of their own children to tabloids for profit.

First, we worked on the introduction of a quote. We wanted to make sure we tied this quote to our claim and also stated clearly why the quote was included. Our sentence to introduce our first quote became, “Celebrities no longer may have the financial incentives to sell photos, even if they would like the extra income.”

We then talked about how to use the quote we chose from the article. Should we just copy the quote after this first sentence? Do we need a technique to introduce the quote? Using language provided by Graff & Birkenstein (2010), we walked through some possible language to help integrate our quote more smoothly into our writing using some sentence frames (Figure 2). We elected to write, “According to New York Magazine’s Kat Stoeffel, ‘..the recession hit [and] some magazines stopped paying for baby photos altogether’ (1).”

TEMPLATES FOR INTRODUCING QUOTES

X states, “_____.”

According to X, “_____.”

In the article, X maintains that “_____.”

In X’s view, “_____.”

X agrees when he writes, “_____.”

X disagrees when she writes, “_____.”

Can also use verbs like: states, asserts, complains, is alarmed, etc.

Figure 2: Sentence frames for introducing quotes (Graff & Birkenstein, 2010)

Finally, we explained our quote, making sure our reader knew why we included it. After reviewing the sentence frames from Figure 3 (Graff & Birkenstein, 2010), we decided to write a fairly straightforward sentence to explain our quote: “The market for baby photos has largely disappeared, leaving celebrities without the option to make large sums of money from their baby’s photos. This reluctance to pay for celebrity baby photos does not appear to be hurting tabloid sales.”

TEMPLATES FOR EXPLAINING QUOTES

Basically, X is saying _____.

In other words, X believes _____.

In making this comment, X argues _____.

X is insisting that _____.

X’s point is that _____.

The essence of X’s argument is that _____.

Figure 3: Sentence frames for explaining quotes (Graff & Birkenstein, 2010)

After working through this together, students were able to write their own paragraph, using another quote from the same article to support our shared claim. We then shared our paragraphs in pairs. From this simple mini-lesson, we were able to begin using the sentence frames and language of the strategy in our own writing moving forward.

Strategy 2: Seeing Stripes

Once students have the idea of sandwiching their quote, they can use this simple technique to assess how well they are using the sandwich strategy. Students simply use a highlighter and find each piece of evidence from their sources in their paper. They highlight those pieces of evidence, whether they are direct quotes or paraphrased from the text(s). They do this highlighting of evidence for each of their body paragraphs. After they are finished, if students are introducing and explaining quotations well, they should see stripes. If they see large blocks of highlighted text and no white space, revision is definitely needed. In Figure 4, we see excerpts from a draft by an 8th grade student. As students become more adept at incorporating evidence, they should notice their white space expands, particularly after a piece of evidence, as they better explain how this piece of evidence supports their claim to the reader.

If we control pythons, then numbers of mammals won't disappear. "The giant invasive snakes are the reason for the near disappearance of rabbits, opossums, raccoons, foxes and even bobcats in the southernmost section of the 1.5 million-acre Everglades. "They're like vacuum cleaners on mammals," according to The Washington Post. The opposite side of the argument might say that controlling the snakes means killing them which is bad. However, it is better to decline the number of one species than numbers of mammal species going extinct.

Burmese pythons are extremely large and very dangerous. Darryl Fears said, "They euthanized the largest snake ever captured in Florida, at 17.5 feet-more than twice as long as former basketball player Shaquille O'Neal is tall." They also reproduce rapidly. Three snakes lay an average of 50-100 eggs per year. That is another reason why these snakes should be left alone because there is no reports of them harming humans but if they continue to repopulate at a fast rate then they will become a serious, uncontrollable problem. They are learning to adapt to various temperatures and they are traveling south.

Figure 4: Example of highlighting text for evidence

The key for this strategy is revision – the purpose is to help students see their words and ideas in proportion to those they have used from the readings. Ultimately, their words and ideas should clearly outnumber the evidence, and their paper should contain both evidence from sources and their own commentary on this evidence. This strategy works well with peer conferencing. Rather than have a student highlight evidence in their own paper, partner students and have them highlight each other's papers, an effective way of also teaching students to read for evidence that supports a claim. The highlighting also gives students a clear role in peer conferencing and something concrete to discuss.

Strategy 3: Using the Moves

As part of our work with the National Writing Project's College-Ready Writers Program (CRWP), we also became acquainted with Joseph Harris's work, *Rewriting: How to Do Things With Texts* (2006). Harris (2006) uses the word move (p. 3) to talk about different ways to incorporate textual evidence to support the purpose of the writer. The moves give us terms to talk about how we can use quotes to best support our own claims. To help students see different ways we can use evidence in our arguments, we introduced four of Harris' moves: illustrating, authorizing, extending, and countering. These terms and moves became part of how we read, wrote, and talked about texts.

We started with illustrating. Illustrating is simply using an example to move your idea forward for the reader. It's basically offering an example from a text to make your point. To help students really understand what illustrating looks like, we used an example of a quotation sandwich with a quotation from a text on the dangers of mountain climbing. Our claim for this argument was that risk takers do not have the right to rescue services. Figure 5 offers an example of illustrating.

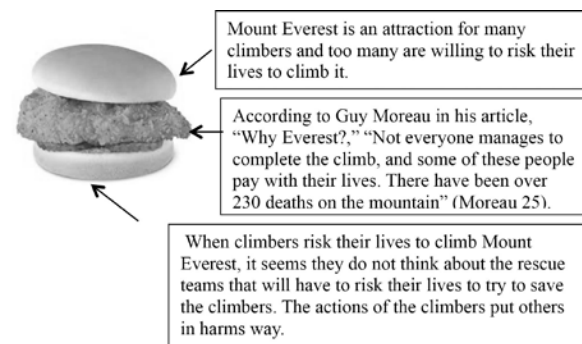


Figure 5: An Illustrating Quotation Sandwich

Authorizing is the next concept we introduced. This move is one of the simplest, because it asks the writer to use the expertise of another to prove their point. Using the same claim (risk takers do not have the right to rescue services), we selected another quote to make our point. Using the same visual support with the quotation sandwich, we offered the following example of authorizing:

Mount Everest is an attraction for many climbers and too many are willing to risk their lives to climb it. According to Rhys Jones, an English climber who successfully completed Everest, "Everyone is aware of the risk...But actually, risk is part of the attraction-it makes it more of a test, it gives you more to aim for" (Moreau 27). Climbers are thrill seekers who

want to overcome the risk of the climb, but this does not mean that rescue teams should have to put their lives in danger when the risk is so great and the climber fails.

Authorizing is usually one of the simplest moves to teach because students are familiar with it; we see people invoke experts regularly when we watch television news programs, read magazines and newspapers, or even have conversations with one another.

Extending is the third move we shared with students. This is when students put their own spin on someone else's idea to further their argument. This may be the most difficult of the moves to teach, in part because it requires some deeper thinking on the part of the student. Using the same example as above, we demonstrated extending by using the statistics about Everest climbers in a new way:

Mount Everest is an attraction for many climbers and of the hundreds who attempt the ascent each year many require assistance to leave the mountain. There have been over 230 deaths on Mount Everest (Moreau 25). This is just the number of climbers who have died, not the number who have required risky rescues. How many times have rescuers put themselves at risk to help an unprepared or injured climber? And among those deaths, how many have been rescuers who have died as they attempted to help less expert climbers get off the mountain? Examining deaths alone does not tell the full story. Clearly, if so many have died, many others may have been injured or maimed in helping climbers who had no business being on Mount Everest in the first place.

Extending is truly the most challenging of the moves so far, because it asks students to put their thinking clearly on paper and to use textual evidence in ways that may seem less straightforward than quoting an expert or simply using a quote to bolster their claim.

The last move we introduced was countering. Especially for middle school students, the idea that we acknowledge the other side's claim was often a challenging concept. First, we needed to identify what an opposing claim might be; according to Harris (2006), a counter is "...designed not to nullify but to suggest a different way of thinking" (p. 54). Our counter could argue the other side, but it could also just illuminate weak points in our argument. Because our claim was fairly simple (risk takers do not have the right to rescue services), coming up with a counter was not difficult. Students readily identified that all climbers have the right to rescue services as a possible counterclaim. We then shared the following example, using evidence from the text:

Members of climbing rescue teams are often in the profession because of a love they have for the sport of climbing. For many rescue

teams, there is a sense of pride when a rescue is attempted, even if it ends in death. The family of Nick Hall, a ranger with Mountain Rainier National Park who lost his life during a rescue mission, explains: "We are proud of our son for his involvement in the mountain rescue. We hope his death will bring attention to the hazards and safety requirements and commitment to be involved in the profession and sport he so loved" (The Seattle Times 29). Rangers and members of mountain rescue teams choose the profession knowing the risk involved. Like all climbers, the risk they face is a challenge to conquer. If we stop here, we have acknowledged the counter, but we have left off a critical step: the pushback. Without the pushback, the counterclaim has the opportunity to carry the day and sway the reader away from your claim. Together, we worked to compose a pushback. For this counter, a pushback might read as follows: But also like all climbers, there are times when the risk is too great and common sense should overrule the thrill of the climb. It is not worth losing additional lives because some climbers do not know their limits.

As we used these moves in classrooms, we realized that to truly use them and use them effectively, students needed to practice them often. The good news is, according to Harris (2006), most academic writing is essentially argument so students should have the opportunity to practice these moves whether they are writing some form of literary criticism or writing an op-ed for the local newspaper.

Seeing Growth

After implementing these strategies and approaches to argument writing, students began making great strides in their incorporation of text. Formerly skimpy paragraphs began to bulk up, as students explained their thinking in more depth. By the end of the academic year, students who had been writing maybe a page to a page and a half in the fall were writing three to four page arguments. The plopping of quotations, although not completely absent, was much improved. In this sample from an eighth grader, written in February, the difference is clear. This student was writing about hunting, and her claim was animal rights groups should not try to stop hunting because hunting helps pay for their goals, including the preservation of wildlife. In her third paragraph, she wrote: Eighty-five percent of Americans feel that hunting has a proper place in society. Meaning, when animal rights organizations toss around the word "majority" on the subject of banning hunting, they are disingenuous. In "Right to Hunt vs. Animal Rights" author Jim Armhein explains, "if the 'majority rule' model applied to matters of personal freedom instead of solely to matters legislative and elective, NOTHING

would be allowed, and no new technologies or activities would ever flourish or even take hold. Imagine how that would affect the economy. Beyond that, the whole point of personal freedoms is to be able to resist the tyranny of the majority if you're so inclined." Basically, using the word "majority" is the wrong way to go. For example, yes, the majority of Americans don't hunt, but no, the majority of us don't want to ban it. If you want more "majority" facts, take a look at a poll led by Roper and Starch. Sixty-two percent of Americans agreed that hunters are the world's leading conservationists. So, how's that for "majority"?

Clearly a well-reasoned argument includes much more than simply including evidence and connecting that evidence to a claim. Writing claims that are debatable, defensible, and insightful (Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredericksen, 2012) can be a challenge as well. We share these strategies as a starting point to help students begin to understand that simply listing evidence does not make an effective argument. Evidence is not the craft of an argument; rather, it is our use of that evidence that makes an argument effective. Giving students tools to make their thinking visible to others is empowering and enables students to advocate for themselves and others and make real change in the world through their words and ideas.

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