

Writing to Inspire or Advise

Overview

Description

After reviewing and analyzing letters and other media that offer advice to incoming high school students, students are asked to write a letter to a first-year student at their school. This assignment addresses students' ability to analyze audience in a meaningful way and to identify and probe into an appropriate issue, drawing on and incorporating their academic experiences. The letters students write will illustrate and support points in ways their audience will find persuasive; they will establish a voice and tone that will connect with the reader; and they will be written in an informal but polished style.

Final Product: Students will explore some component of their academic life and convey an insight or offer advice in a letter that communicates effectively with a high school freshman.

Subject

English IV

Task Level

Grade 12

Objectives

Students will:

- Use the Internet and other sources to find compelling letters that offer useful advice to high school students.
- As a class, discuss and analyze the message, development, and style—especially the writer's voice—in selected letters. Is the message obvious? Does it provide meaningful insights for the intended reader? Is the voice friendly? Wise? Bored? Excited? What elements of style establish the voice? What sorts of voice are likely to engage a freshman? What sorts will not?
- Compare the insights and advice offered in the letters. Which ones matter? How might their importance be made more apparent to the intended reader? Which seem to lack insight? Which offer helpful advice?
- Brainstorm other potential messages to incoming freshman and how they might be developed.
- Use the writing process to brainstorm ideas for and compose a letter to incoming freshmen.

- Collaborate with peers, asking for advice on particular points or sections of their letters and sharing the draft as a whole. This process should prompt students through several revisions of their drafts.
- Conference with the instructor to focus on revising and editing their draft.
- Use specific techniques for effective editing.
- Turn in the final draft.
- Select several letters to be read aloud to the class.
- Send the letters to a freshman English class for feedback.

Preparation

- Prepare student copies of the Student Notes pages.
- Use Google and other search engines to identify Internet sites with noteworthy examples of letters for high school students.
- Provide a variety of model letters for students.
- Ensure student access to the Internet.
- Select letters to present to the class and frame the assignment.
- Meet with a freshmen-level instructor to establish logistics (e.g., How will the letters be distributed? How will the response process be handled?).
- Provide the freshmen with a list of questions to serve as a basis for their feedback.

Prior Knowledge

- Students have a firm understanding of and practice in all parts of the writing process, including invention, drafting, revision, and proofreading, and should be comfortable using word processing software.
- Students should understand the concept of audience analysis as a means of generating and developing meaningful content.
- Students should be experienced in adapting voice and style to audience and occasion.
- Students should have ready access to the Internet and be familiar with effective ways of searching it.

Key Concepts and Terms

- Conference
- Draft
- Edit
- Revise
- Tone
- Voice

Time Frame

This assignment should take four to five days to complete. Students should spend one day listening to, researching, reading, and collaboratively analyzing letters to high school students. Students should arrive at class the next day having located and analyzed three “open” letters, which they will turn in to the instructor. The students should then complete the first draft of their own letter at home. They will spend the third day consulting individually with their instructor and participating in revision and editing activities with their peers. They will work in groups on the fourth day to review the drafts and to select several to be read aloud. They will then complete and turn in the final drafts, which will be delivered to a freshman English class for response.

Instructional Plan

Getting Started

Learning Objectives

As a class, students will:

- Read and analyze letters of advice to high school students.
- Identify and analyze the audience, purpose, and message of each of the letters.
- Identify which letters discuss topics in a way that offers the readers meaningful insights and which letters never probe beyond the surface; identify how some letters move beyond generalizations or platitudes to offer useful and insightful advice.
- Generate ideas about appropriate topics to discuss in a letter of advice.

Procedure

1. Read selected letters of advice addressed to high school students.
2. Guide students to analyze the letters in terms of audience, purpose, content, organization, and voice.
3. Lead the students to an accurate and specific assessment of what makes individual letters effective or ineffective.

Investigating

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Locate and analyze additional letters individually and in groups as part of the preparation to write their own letters to freshmen.

Procedure

1. Have students use the Internet independently to locate four open letters to students in diverse circumstances.
2. Instruct students to write a summary paragraph for each letter identifying the writer's main message and the evidence that supports the writer's assertion. Students should follow each summary with an assessment of how persuasive each letter is likely to be for its targeted audience, should explain why they have come to this assessment, and, when appropriate, point out and explain useful lines of development the writer might have taken. Students should conclude by noting, as specifically as possible, how this exercise will affect their own letter.

3. Collect the student work and copies of the letters they analyzed.
4. Instruct each group to identify three messages that they deem most important to communicate to the freshman class and, with their prior investigation in mind, to consider how best to communicate those messages.

Drawing Conclusions

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Use the writing process to compose, revise, and publish a letter to a freshman at their school.

Procedure

1. Instruct the students to plan, generate content for, and compose a first draft.
2. Hold a conference with each student in order to provide feedback on content, organization, audience accommodation, and style. Remind students to take notes during this conference.
3. Allow the students to share their letters with one another and to identify and present examples of effective letters to the class.
4. After students have made final revisions and edits, have them turn in the draft they presented at the conference, the notes they took at the conference, and a formatted, clean copy of their finished letter.
5. Collect the letters and the notes from the conference. Take the letters to a freshman class that will provide responses and feedback.

Scaffolding/Instructional Support

The goal of scaffolding is to provide support to encourage student success, independence, and self-management. Instructors can use these suggestions, in part or all together, to meet diverse student needs. The more skilled the student, however, the less scaffolding that he or she will need. Some examples of scaffolding that could apply to this assignment include:

- Provide additional copies of exemplar letters.
- Guide students through a brainstorming exercise to come up with a list of worries that concern freshman.
- Provide individual guidance to help students explore their topic and thus deepen their message.
- Conference with each student to ensure effective communication in the writing process in terms of purpose, audience, and content.
- Provide guided, collaborative opportunities for feedback.
- Provide guided, collaborative opportunities for effective editing practices.
- Instructors should keep in mind that websites featuring letters of advice tend to favor “friendly” letters (see addresses below) and should select letters that represent a range of perspectives and approaches. Students will benefit from seeing how this task can be approached in different but equally effective ways (e.g., a letter that is serious and one that is humorous). Students will also benefit from seeing advice given from different perspectives. For example, how an athlete views his school or offers advice may vary greatly from the Cross X debate captain, yet both have valid insights to offer incoming freshmen.
- Instructors may want to write other types of “model” letters themselves to offer students a range of possible models.
- In a related genre, former President George W Bush’s daughters sent a letter of advice to the daughters of President Barack Obama that was later published in *The Wall Street Journal* (<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123239885943895155.html>). Students may find it useful.
- Additional examples of open letters can be found at the following sites (note that some of the examples involve college students rather than high school students):
 - <http://www.scranton.edu/academics/cas/psychology/freshmenletters.shtml>
 - <http://ptmoney.com/high-school-graduate-money-letter/>

TCCRS Cross-Disciplinary Standards Addressed

Performance Expectation	Getting Started	Investigating	Drawing Conclusions
<i>I. Key Cognitive Skills</i>			
D.1. Self-monitor learning needs and seek assistance when needed.	✓	✓	✓
D.3. Strive for accuracy and precision.	✓	✓	✓
D.4. Persevere to complete and master tasks.	✓	✓	✓
E.1. Work independently.	✓	✓	✓
E.2. Work collaboratively.		✓	✓
<i>II. Foundational Skills</i>			
A.3. Identify the intended purpose and audience of the text.			✓
B.1. Write clearly and coherently using standard writing conventions.			✓
B.3. Compose and revise drafts.			✓
E.1. Use technology to gather information.	✓	✓	

TCCRS English/Language Arts Standards Addressed

Performance Expectation	Getting Started	Investigating	Drawing Conclusions
<i>I. Writing</i>			
A.1. Determine effective approaches, forms, and rhetorical techniques that demonstrate understanding of the writer's purpose and audience.			✓
A.2. Generate ideas and gather information relevant to the topic and purpose, keeping careful records of outside sources.			✓
A.3. Evaluate relevance, quality, sufficiency, and depth of preliminary ideas and information, organize material generated, and formulate a thesis.			✓

A.4. Recognize the importance of revision as the key to effective writing. Each draft should refine key ideas and organize them more logically and fluidly, use language more precisely and effectively, and draw the reader to the author's purpose.			✓
A.5. Edit writing for proper voice, tense, and syntax, assuring that it conforms to standard English, when appropriate. ?			✓
<i>II. Reading</i>			
A.9. Identify and analyze the audience, purpose, and message of an informational or persuasive text.	✓		

TEKS Standards Addressed

<i>Writing to Inspire or Advise - Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS): English Language Arts and Reading</i>
110.34.b.1. Reading/Vocabulary Development. Students understand new vocabulary and use it when reading and writing. Students are expected to: 110.34.b.1.A. Determine the meaning of technical academic English words in multiple content areas (e.g., science, mathematics, social studies, the arts) derived from Latin, Greek, or other linguistic roots and affixes. 110.34.b.1.B. Analyze textual context (within a sentence and in larger sections of text) to draw conclusions about the nuance in word meanings. 110.34.b.1.E. Use general and specialized dictionaries, thesauri, histories of language, books of quotations, and other related references (printed or electronic) as needed.
110.34.b.6. Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Literary Nonfiction. Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about the varied structural patterns and features of literary nonfiction and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. Students are expected to analyze the effect of ambiguity, contradiction, subtlety, paradox, irony, sarcasm, and overstatement in literary essays, speeches, and other forms of literary nonfiction.
110.34.b.7. Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Sensory Language. Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about how an author's sensory language creates imagery in literary text and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. Students are expected to analyze how the author's patterns of imagery, literary allusions, and conceits reveal theme, set tone, and create meaning in metaphors, passages, and literary works.
110.34.b.8. Reading/Comprehension of Informational Text/Culture and History. Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about the author's purpose in cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding. Students are expected to analyze the consistency and clarity of the expression of the controlling idea and the ways in which the organizational and rhetorical patterns of text support or confound the author's meaning or purpose.

Writing to Inspire or Advise - Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS): English Language Arts and Reading

110.34.b.9. Reading/Comprehension of Informational Text/Expository Text. Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about expository text and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. Students are expected to:

- 110.34.b.9.A. Summarize a text in a manner that captures the author's viewpoint, its main ideas, and its elements without taking a position or expressing an opinion.
- 110.34.b.9.C. Make and defend subtle inferences and complex conclusions about the ideas in text and their organizational patterns.

110.34.b.10 Reading/Comprehension of Informational Text/Persuasive Text. Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about persuasive text and provide evidence from text to support their analysis. Students are expected to:

- 110.34.b.10.A. Evaluate the merits of an argument, action, or policy by analyzing the relationships (e.g., implication, necessity, sufficiency) among evidence, inferences, assumptions, and claims in text.
- 110.34.b.10.B. Draw conclusions about the credibility of persuasive text by examining its implicit and stated assumptions about an issue as conveyed by the specific use of language.

110.34.b.11. Reading/Comprehension of Informational Text/Procedural Texts. Students understand how to glean and use information in procedural texts and documents. Students are expected to:

- 110.34.b.11.A. Draw conclusions about how the patterns of organization and hierarchic structures support the understandability of text.
- 110.34.b.11.B. Evaluate the structures of text (e.g., format, headers) for their clarity and organizational coherence and for the effectiveness of their graphic representations.

110.34.b.13. Writing/Writing Process. Students use elements of the writing process (planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) to compose text. Students are expected to:

- 110.34.b.13.A. Plan a first draft by selecting the correct genre for conveying the intended meaning to multiple audiences, determining appropriate topics through a range of strategies (e.g., discussion, background reading, personal interests, interviews), and developing a thesis or controlling idea.
- 110.34.b.7.B. Structure ideas in a sustained and persuasive way (e.g., using outlines, note taking, graphic organizers, lists) and develop drafts in timed and open-ended situations that include transitions and the rhetorical devices to convey meaning.
- 110.34.b.7.C. Revise drafts to clarify meaning and achieve specific rhetorical purposes, consistency of tone, and logical organization by rearranging the words, sentences, and paragraphs to employ tropes (e.g., metaphors, similes, analogies, hyperbole, understatement, rhetorical questions, irony), schemes (e.g., parallelism, antithesis, inverted word order, repetition, reversed structures), and by adding transitional words and phrases.
- 110.34.b.7.D. Edit drafts for grammar, mechanics, and spelling.
- 110.34.b.7.E. Revise final draft in response to feedback from peers and teacher and publish written work for appropriate audiences.

<i>Writing to Inspire or Advise - Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS): English Language Arts and Reading</i>
<p>110.34.b.15. Writing/Literary Texts. Writing/Expository and Procedural Texts. Students write expository and procedural or work-related texts to communicate ideas and information to specific audiences for specific purposes. Students are expected to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 110.34.b.13.A. Write an analytical essay of sufficient length that includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 110.34.b.13.A.i. Effective introductory and concluding paragraphs and a variety of sentence structures. 110.34.b.13.A.ii. Rhetorical devices, and transitions between paragraphs. 110.34.b.13.A.iii. A clear thesis statement or controlling idea. 110.34.b.13.A.iv. A clear organizational schema for conveying ideas. 110.34.b.13.A.v. Relevant and substantial evidence and well-chosen details. 110.34.b.13.A.vi. Information on all relevant perspectives and consideration of the validity, reliability, and relevance of primary and secondary sources. 110.34.b.13.A.vii. An analysis of views and information that contradict the thesis statement and the evidence presented for it.
<p>110.34.b.17. Oral and Written Conventions/Conventions. Students understand the function of and use the conventions of academic language when speaking and writing. Students will continue to apply earlier standards with greater complexity. Students are expected to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 110.34.b.17.A. Use and understand the function of different types of clauses and phrases (e.g., adjectival, noun, adverbial clauses and phrases). 110.34.b.17.B. Use a variety of correctly structured sentences (e.g., compound, complex, compound-complex).
<p>110.34.b.18. Oral and Written Conventions/Handwriting, Capitalization, and Punctuation. Students write legibly and use appropriate capitalization and punctuation conventions in their compositions. Students are expected to correctly and consistently use conventions of punctuation and capitalization.</p>
<p>110.34.b.19. Oral and Written Conventions/Spelling. Students spell correctly. Students are expected to spell correctly, including using various resources to determine and check correct spellings.</p>
<p>110.34.b.24. Listening and Speaking/Listening. Students will use comprehension skills to listen attentively to others in formal and informal settings. Students will continue to apply earlier standards with greater complexity. Students are expected to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 110.34.b.24.A. Listen responsively to a speaker by framing inquiries that reflect an understanding of the content and by identifying the positions taken and the evidence in support of those positions. 110.34.b.24.B. Assess the persuasiveness of a presentation based on content, diction, rhetorical strategies, and delivery.
<p>110.34.b.25. Listening and Speaking/Speaking. Students speak clearly and to the point, using the conventions of language. Students will continue to apply earlier standards with greater complexity. Students are expected to formulate sound arguments by using elements of classical speeches (e.g., introduction, first and second transitions, body, and conclusion), the art of persuasion, rhetorical devices, eye contact, speaking rate (e.g., pauses for effect), volume, enunciation, purposeful gestures, and conventions of language to communicate ideas effectively.</p>
<p>110.34.b.26. Listening and Speaking/Teamwork. Students work productively with others in teams. Students will continue to apply earlier standards with greater complexity. Students are expected to participate productively in teams, offering ideas or judgments that are purposeful in moving the team towards goals, asking relevant and insightful questions, tolerating a range of positions and ambiguity in decision-making, and evaluating the work of the group based on agreed-upon criteria.</p>

Writing to Inspire or Advise

Introduction

In this assignment you will experience a unique opportunity to communicate with an incoming freshman. As a senior, you have so much to share about your experiences and can offer helpful advice for success. After reading and discussing several letters of advice to high school students, you will use the writing process to compose a letter to a freshman at your own school, revise it, and publish it. The letters will be shared in groups and in the class as a whole. Then, the letters will be sent to a class of actual freshmen, who will each receive one of the letters. The freshmen will send back their responses and feedback.

Directions

Getting Started

1. In small groups, read and discuss several interesting letters of advice to high school students.
2. Determine common themes, strengths, weaknesses, and main points of the letters as a group. Be prepared to present these findings to the larger class.
3. With the class, discuss and analyze the audience, purpose, content, organization, and tone of the letters.
4. Identify similarities and differences in the letters and evaluate the most effective.

Investigating

1. Using the Internet, find three other examples of “open” letters of advice written to individuals in various circumstances.
2. Read the letters and identify the fundamental messages they contain. Write a paragraph summarizing these messages, explaining the evidence that led you to conclude that the author intended this message.
3. Turn in your letters and summary paragraphs.
4. Begin generating a list of the three most important messages for today's freshman. Consider how such messages might be best communicated based on your research.

Drawing Conclusions

1. Begin the writing process by composing the first draft of a letter of advice to a freshman.
2. Conference with the instructor on message and editing issues. Take notes on the conference to turn in with your final draft.
3. Write a second draft.
4. Turn in the final draft and the notes from your conference.
5. Share the final draft with peers, and collaboratively select the most effective letters to be read aloud.
6. The letters will be collected and sent to freshmen in an English class in your school.