Informative/Explanatory Writing and the CCSS

Informative/Explanatory Writing Defined
What distinguishes informative or explanatory writing is the goal of conveying information clearly, logically, and objectively. Explanations are designed to inform and enhance the reader’s comprehension of a topic, concept, procedure or process. Informative writing is also used to clarify a reader’s understanding of the relationships used to explain something, such as different kinds or types or the component parts of something (e.g. a sonnet and a haiku are both kinds of poems, and an Elizabethan sonnet contains three quatrains and a couplet). Explanations can also delve into the function or behavior of an object or idea to describe how it works and why things happen (e.g. what is the purpose of the legislative branch, how Congress passes a law, and why filibusters occur).

Both informative and argumentative writing rely on evidence but for different purposes. While arguments try to convince readers to accept the truth of an opinion or assertion, explanations seek to clarify a topic whose truth is not being debated. Arguments use evidence to try and sway the reader to accept a point of view, while explanations present evidence for informative purposes. Informative writing is called for in a variety of situations and disciplines. Whether fashioning a literary analysis or scientific report or crafting a business memo or instructional manual, creating explanations forces writers to use the available evidence to understand all dimensions of the idea, event, or process under investigation. By doing so writers not only “develop a controlling idea and a coherent focus” in their explanation, but explore different dimensions of the idea through the selection and incorporation of “relevant examples, facts, and details.”

Writing Informative/Explanatory Texts and the CCSS
The CCSS acknowledge the critical role informative writing plays through Anchor Writing Standard 2, which explicitly calls on students to “examine and convey complex ideas and information” in their writing by “clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.” This emphasis on evidence is crucial for college and career readiness and central to a key purpose of informative writing: to “develop the capacity to build knowledge on a subject through research projects.” The ability to develop a topic, organize the supporting evidence, and create cohesion between different parts of the explanation is an essential skill for whatever path students take after graduating from high school.

Yet managing evidence is not a task solely for older students: from the earliest grades the standards for informative writing instruct students to supply information about the topic they are writing about using facts and definitions, and by middle school they broaden their techniques of explanation to include classification, comparison and contrast, and cause and effect. There is an array of methods students can use to effectively explain something, from simply and accurately naming it to offering up an anecdote to illustrate a deeper idea or concept. As they move up through the grades, students also expand their repertoire of explanatory genres, using them to meet the expectations of Anchor Writing Standard 4: “Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.”

Key Elements of Informative/Explanatory Writing

- a topic that focuses on explaining a complex idea or concept
- an organizational text structure that makes specific distinctions and clear connections
- evidence and examples from sources that support and develop the topic
- domain-specific vocabulary and precise language to aid in explaining the topic
- transitional language that creates cohesion and clarifies relationships between ideas
- a concluding statement that follows from the information or explanation presented