



Understanding and Responding to Writing Prompts Guide

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Research Center**

*Student Reading
Success Through
Research and
Collaboration*



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What Are Writing Prompts?

A writing prompt is direction to write about a particular topic. This may be presented in one or more sentences, or it may include a short passage, picture, or other content that serves as a starting point for the written response.

A well-constructed writing prompt can provide students important guidance for showcasing the writing skills they have been taught. Generally, writing prompts include five components:

1. **Topic:** on what the response should focus
2. **Audience:** to whom the response should be addressed
3. **Task:** how information on the topic should be organized (e.g., description, sequence, compare-contrast, analysis, synthesis, cause-effect, explanation)
4. **Format:** the style of writing of writing for the response (e.g., essay, argument, speech, letter, narrative)
5. **Special requirements:** additional expectations for the prompt (e.g., length, textual evidence, number of supports, kinds of details)

In addition, prompts that require literary analysis may indicate the particular themes, symbols, or major ideas in the text that students need to address. Literary prompts also may include important stanzas or scenes to focus a student's attention on how the literature is using the text to communicate a message.

These components of a writing prompt provide students with a clear idea of what they are expected to do and the steps they need to follow to compose a complete response. However, students need to know how to identify these components and use them to plan their writing.

This guide is intended to assist with better understanding four kinds of writing prompts (creative, historical essay, argumentative essay, and literary analysis) and what they require students to do. It can be used by instructors as they plan lessons to teach these skills or as a resource for students and their families who are working on writing development at home. The information is appropriate for Grades 3–12, but some of the more complex aspects of understanding and responding to writing prompts are only appropriate for students in higher grade levels or those with better developed skills.



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**CREATIVE WRITING
PROMPTS**

Creative Writing Prompts

These prompts ask students to explore an interesting fictional or fantasy scenario or concept.

Example Creative Writing Prompt

Create a monster from some of your greatest fears. Develop a fictional narrative that describes the physical features of the monster and its actions that play on your fears. Use language to evoke an emotional response by the reader.

Breakdown of the Prompt Components

1. **Topic:** A monster that represents greatest fears
2. **Task:** provide details to describe the monster and what it does
3. **Audience:** none specified, so all potential readers
4. **Format:** fictional narrative
5. **Special requirements:** use emotional language

Creative writing prompts are rooted in the imaginative creation of a story rather than relying on facts or textual evidence. But, creative writing prompts still ask much of students.

For example, creative writing prompts require students to use narrative technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences (National Governors Association for Best Practices & Chief State School Officers [NGABP & CSSO], 2010, [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3](#)). In order to write narratives with this complexity and technique, students must be taught how to do the following:

1. **Plan and structure their narrative to give the reader a clear understanding of the progression of events:** Students must learn how various texts unfold. This involves understanding how the setting is established, how characters are introduced, and how events unfold from beginning to climax to ending.
2. **Implement narrative techniques:** Using the prompt given as an example, students must be able to characterize the monster that represents their greatest fears. They might include how the monster sounds and what it says. Students will need to use words to show the monster to readers or create a picture of it in readers' minds. This is particularly important to meeting the special requirement in the sample prompt of evoking emotion. To develop these skills, students can review quality short stories and excerpts from novels that offer successful examples of narrative techniques for students to emulate.
3. **Decide what details are most important within their writing:** By reading a piece of writing with powerful details compared to one that is generic and lacks description, students can discuss with a writing instructor what descriptive details are important to include in their own writing. An instructor or peer can provide feedback on an outline or draft to help a writer identify which details are relevant to a story and which are distracting.

4. **Format an effective conclusion:** Narratives can end in various ways. Students need to read examples of fictional narratives and discuss what makes their conclusions surprising, predictable, or abrupt. Students also should learn to identify the techniques that create effective endings for different types of narratives.



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**HISTORICAL ESSAY
WRITING PROMPTS**

Historical Essay Prompts

These prompts ask students to delve into the details of history to reach a conclusion about a major event.

Example Historical Essay Prompt

Write an essay explaining to someone unfamiliar with French history the factors that prompted the Third Estate to mobilize against the ruling classes. Include textual evidence from the reading assignment to connect these factors to the start of the French Revolution.

Breakdown of the Prompt Components

1. **Topic:** what caused the Third Estate to move against the ruling classes
2. **Task:** explain the factors and how they led to the start of the French Revolution
3. **Audience:** readers who don't know about French history
4. **Format:** essay
5. **Special requirements:** include textual details from the reading assignment

In the essays resulting from these types of prompts, students trace the sequence of causes and effects associated with major events in history. This type of writing requires careful examination of informative or explanatory texts, analysis of complex ideas and concepts, and organization of the response to maintain clarity and accuracy (NGABP & CSSO, 2010, [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2](#)). To write historical essays, students must be taught how to do the following:

1. **Research important historical information in reputable sources and integrate the information into their own writing** (NGABP & CSSO, 2010, [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7](#) and [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.8](#)): If the texts are not provided by an instructor, students will need to learn how to find reputable sources and scholarly articles that can be used to accomplish their writing topic and task. It may be helpful for students to use a guide for evaluating the credibility of sources and an organizational tool, such as a graphic organizer, to keep track of what they find.
2. **Organize their ideas:** Students must be able to decide in what order they will present their analysis of a historical event. Some prompts may be better suited to a chronological sequence. Other prompts may be addressed by starting at the climax of the event and working backward. Without an organized structure, information will seem haphazardly included and the essay will become confusing to a reader.
3. **Determine which information is most relevant and supportive of understanding the topic and task:** Students must be taught to be specific with their language and vocabulary in order to establish major points and historical context for the reader. For example, within essay resulting from the French Revolution example above, students should incorporate a definition for the Third Estate and who constituted the "ruling classes."

4. **Transition from one topic to the next in order to make the essay cohesive and establish a relationship between many ideas:** Transition words and phrases help logically connect ideas in the essay. Students can use available lists of transition words and phrases such as the [list available from the Smart Words](#) website. However, to improve students' abilities to apply these transitions appropriately, they need to review examples and non-examples of cohesive transitions in sample written pieces. They can discuss with a peer or writing instructor how a cohesive transition ties two ideas together and makes the writing easier to understand, as well as where a non-cohesive transition seems to disrupt the ideas or make the writing too repetitive or formulaic.
5. **Maintain a professional and objective writing voice throughout the essay:** Typically, a standard historical essay is told without personal interjections or statements of opinions. These writing pieces are intended to be straightforward and to avoid strong emotion. Reviewing and discussing contrasting examples of objective and subjective essays may help highlight the differences in writing style.
6. **Provide a conclusion that offers answers as well as leads readers to understand the importance of the essay.** The ends of historical essays not only summarize the main point, but also suggest the future implications of what was addressed or any lasting impacts it had. The conclusion leaves readers with an understanding of why they should care about this information.



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**ARGUMENTATIVE
WRITING PROMPTS**

Argumentative Essay Prompts

These writing prompts lead students to take a position on a controversial topic and back up their claims with evidence.

Example Argumentative Essay Prompt

Should scientists test products on animals? Based on the research you have read, craft an argument for the benefits of this practice or against the negative consequences associated with it.

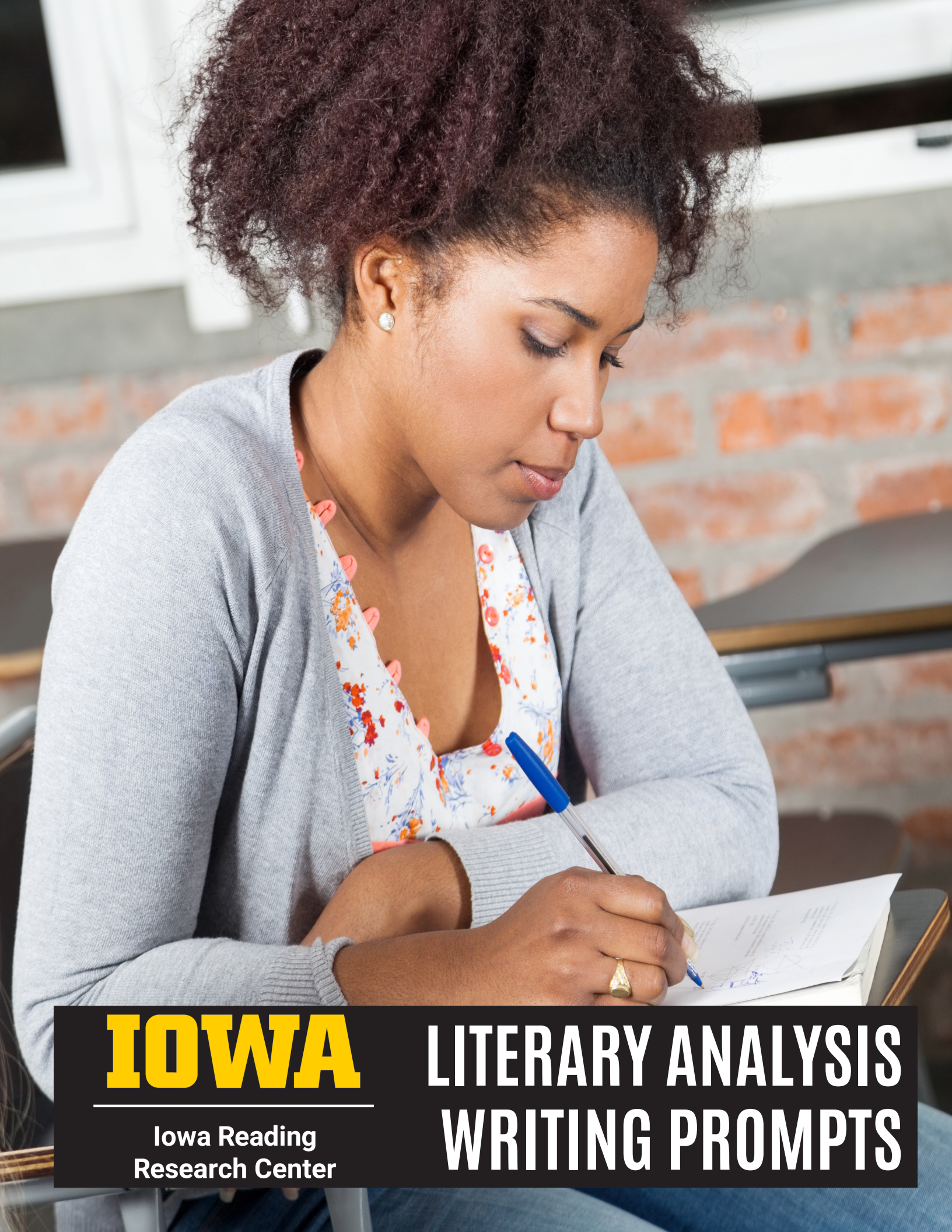
Breakdown of the Prompt Components

1. **Topic:** scientific testing on animals
2. **Task:** argue for the benefits or against the negative consequences of scientific testing on animals
3. **Audience:** general
4. **Format:** argumentative essay
5. **Special requirements:** use the research from the reading assignment

Argumentative essays are based on research, and students must describe the pros and cons of the topic, using credible evidence to support their chosen stance. This style of writing is similar to opinion or persuasive essays, but argumentative essays have important differences. For example, they are not directed at a particular person or group, they contain more data, and the writer respectfully acknowledges the counterargument or opposing view. Unlike their related forms, argumentative essays are not written in first person (“I...” or “We...”). Rather, they are written in third person (“One...” or “Those who...”) and have a formal tone. The writer should be less aggressive than in a persuasive essay and argue based on logic, facts, data, expert quotes, and evidence. The goal is to present the argument as the truth on the matter. This type of writing requires students to analyze substantive topics, present valid reasoning for the argument, and support claims with sufficient and relevant evidence (NGABP & CSSO, 2010, [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1](#)). In order to do this, students must learn how to do the following:

1. **Develop a precise claim for their argument:** A strong argument states the writer’s position or stance on the topic in a way that is debatable, focused, and clear. An explanation of how to write the claim is provided in the Iowa Reading Research Center blog post [“Effective Literacy Lesson: Constructing an Argumentative Claim.”](#) Arguments are not supported with personal ideas or opinions, so students must begin crafting their arguments by gathering information and data from reputable sources. It may be helpful for students to use a guide for evaluating the credibility of sources and an organizational tool, such as a graphic organizer, to keep track of what they find. When students have gathered sufficient information on the topic, they can list claims for and against the topic. This will ensure their arguments address not only the support for the presented position in the essay, but also what the counterclaims might be.

2. **Organize the information they present to a reader through evidence:** Argumentative essays follow a common pattern of introducing the topic, making a thesis statement that establishes the writer's stance, and providing a logical order of points (for or against) with explanations of and rebuttals for counterpoints. These essays are not simply a listing of facts or bulleted points. Rather, the writer must connect the ideas to create a sound rationale for the stance taken. A helpful [resource on organizing the argumentative essay](#) is offered by George Brown College. To highlight what makes an argument more coherent, students can review and discuss examples of argumentative essays that are well organized and contrast them with essays that have weak organization.
3. **Create a conclusion that ties together the evidence under the claim:** Argumentative essays end by bringing together the claims and evidence to reinforce the stance taken on the topic. Conclusions should not repeat what has already been said, nor should they introduce new information. The goals of the conclusion are to connect with the introduction, provide the key takeaway points that tie together the claims made, and offer any connections to the bigger picture on the issue. [A description of the essay conclusion and its relationship to the introduction is provided in this resource by the University of Adelaide.](#)



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**LITERARY ANALYSIS
WRITING PROMPTS**

Literary Analysis Writing Prompts

These writing prompts guide students to write a literary analysis of a text.

Example Literary Analysis Writing Prompt

Authors tend to include symbols in their works to highlight an important theme. In Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, analyze a symbol within her autobiographical fiction and explain what theme you believe this symbol highlights throughout the memoir.

Breakdown of the Prompt Components

1. **Topic:** symbol for a theme in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
2. **Task:** analyze the symbol and explain what theme it represents
3. **Audience:** general
4. **Format:** literary analysis
5. **Special requirements:** reference how the symbol and theme are used throughout the memoir

This kind of writing typically involves explaining and reflecting on specified literary elements or devices. Students must know what these terms are and how to identify them in a literary work (see a [literary devices and terms glossary](#) from sixth-grade teacher Keith Schoch). However, literary analysis involves more than just naming or defining the elements and devices. Instead, students' responses must use evidence from the text to support how they are interpreting the author's use of the element or device (NGABP & CSSO, 2010, [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9](#)). Responses are similar to arguments because the writer has to make a specific, well-reasoned point about the attributes of the literary work and defend those points with evidence from the text. They also are not written to a specific audience, are phrased in the third person, and are formal in tone. To appropriately respond to literary analysis writing prompts, students must learn how to do the following:

1. **Develop a thesis statement:** The thesis statement of a literary analysis clearly presents the writer's position or stance about the use of a literary element or device. It must be focused and open to other interpretations. In addition, it should make specific reference to the work being analyzed. [Sample patterns for phrasing the thesis statement](#) are provided on the University of Texas at Arlington Libraries website. Because the thesis statement appears in the introduction of the essay, it should be accompanied by a definition of the literary element or device that is the topic of the response.
2. **Identify an example or examples of the literary element or device within the text:** The support for the thesis is an interpretation of the work, but it is not merely an opinion. Students need to read the text carefully and annotate instances of the element or device. Evidence also may come from published critiques of the work and from biographies about or autobiographies of the author. Whereas an informational argument typically paraphrases most textual evidence, a literary

analysis is more likely to use a combination of concrete details, direct quotes, and paraphrasing as support for how the work is being interpreted. [Examples of textual evidence and how to use them](#) are provided in this resource from Bucks Community College.

- 3. Organize the information presented to the reader:** The support of the thesis statement in a literary analysis is carefully structured to weave together evidence and commentary on that evidence. First, the writer should establish the context for the example before stating the concrete detail, quote, or paraphrased example. Then, the writer provides commentary or justifies and explains how the example supports the thesis statement. Commentary is not a plot summary. Rather, it shows the writer's critical thinking about the literary work and includes reflection on the evidence and insightful remarks about what is not readily apparent in the evidence. Commentary also might include situating the textual evidence in the historical or cultural context of the literary work. To use the writing prompt about *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as an example, a student's commentary would need to explain the racial segregation experienced by Maya Angelou. There should be about two commentary statements for each example presented.
- 4. Create a conclusion:** A literary analysis ends by synthesizing the attributes of the literary work and connecting the key points back to the thesis statement. Conclusions should not directly repeat statements that were already made, nor should it introduce new points or information. However, a conclusion can leave the reader with a thought-provoking idea based on what was presented. High School English Teacher Allie Stanley provides [two sample conclusions](#) on her website.

References

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers (2010). *Common Core State Standards – English Language Arts Standards*. <https://www.thecorestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/>