“What does good student writing at this grade level look like?”

The answer lies in the writing itself.

The Writing Standards in Action Project uses high quality student writing samples to illustrate what performance to grade level standards looks like—in action.

Grade 8
English Language Arts

Opinion / Argument
(Letter to the Editor)

Many Faiths (Version 2)
Many Faiths (Version 2)

Opinion/Argument

Grade 8 English Language Arts

Letter to the Editor

(WHST.6-8.1), (WHST.6-8.4), (RI.8.1), (RH.6-8.6), (RI.8.8), (L.8.2), (L.8.3)

See descriptions of these standards in the right column of the next page.

Important Note About This Sample:

This sample is the first of two posted letters to the editor written by different writers in response to the same assignment. Each writer produces an argument in reaction to an op-ed piece, “Many Faiths, One Truth,” by Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama.* The samples develop similar arguments but emphasize different elements of effective writing.

The writer of this sample, Version 2 (Sample B8-8b), relies on adeptly linked textual evidence, rather than elaborate reasoning, to give weight to an argument that supports the Dalai Lama’s claims without expanding upon them.

In comparison, the writer of Version 1 (Sample B8-8a) agrees with the Dalai Lama’s claims by delineating and expanding upon them with a combination of evidence and reasoning expressed precisely and in a formal manner. For more, read each sample and the commentary that follows.

STANDARDS-BASED COMMENTARY

The student writing sample that follows includes standards-based commentary. The commentary found in this column describes how the writing meets the standards in the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy (2011) and other content frameworks when applicable.

Understanding the Standards-Based Commentary

1. Grade-specific standards addressed are:
   - Listed in the column to the right of student work by strand, grade, and number (or number and letter, where applicable)
   - Marked by a colored block with a letter code, also in the column to the right of student work

   EXAMPLE: A

2. Colored arrow blocks beneath each standard in the right column:
   - Are of the same color and letter code as the block that marks the standard being addressed
   - Mark standards-based commentary related to the standard being addressed
   - Appear in alphabetical order

   EXAMPLE: A1

3. Corresponding colored arrow blocks within the text:
   - Set off sections of student work to which commentary applies
   - Do not necessarily appear in alphabetical order—but where evidence of a particular standard exists

   EXAMPLE: (begin) A1 section A1 (end)
Highlights:
This sample of student work meets grade level standards. It demonstrates the following attributes of effective writing.

The sample:
- Introduces clear claim
- Cites clear and convincing text-based evidence to support the claim
- Refers to arguments and describes relevant claims made in two informational texts
- Identifies aspects of two informational texts that reveal the points of view of their authors
- Integrates text-based evidence and enhances style with a variety of linking words, phrases, and clauses
- Demonstrates conciseness appropriate to a letter to the editor
- Provides a conclusion that reemphasizes the claim

Instructional Practices:
The teacher used the following practices:
- Instruction on the characteristics of newspaper editorials and op-ed pieces
- Discussion of letters to the editor written in response to editorials and op-ed pieces
- Instruction regarding expression of a common theme across multiple genres

Please note:
The samples may contain inaccuracies in wording and content or shortcomings in the use of standard English conventions.
Assignment Description:
Students wrote a letter to the editor in response to a New York Times op-ed piece, Many Faiths, One Truth, by Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama.* Students used textual evidence from the op-ed, as well as materials of their choosing from a common set of thematically related materials, to develop an argument for or against the opinion presented by the Dalai Lama.
*(www.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/opinion/25gyatso.html?_r=0)

Intended Audience:
Teacher, fellow students, others interested in the topic

Time:
2 weeks

Writing Process:
Pre-writing; organizing; drafting; revising; self-editing; peer-editing/peer response; publishing

Materials:
• Main texts: the op-ed piece, Many Faiths, One Truth, and Akbar in the Mughal Empire
• Supplemental texts: a set of thematically related materials including brief descriptions of the world’s five major religions and the poem, Tolerance by Sri Chinmoy
• Miscellaneous materials: written explanations of the terms, editorial and op-ed; writing warm-up sheet; table on which students could record and clarify confusing words and phrases from the op-ed; graphic organizer; peer review sheet; analytic “Argument Rubric”

List of Standards Addressed, Continued:

Reading Standards for Informational Text:
Grade 8, Standard 8 (RI. 8.8)
Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; recognize when irrelevant evidence is introduced.
EXAMPLE: B

Language Standards:
Grade 8, Standard 2 (L.8.2)
Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.
EXAMPLE: G

Language Standards:
Grade 8, Standard 3 (L.8.3)
Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.
EXAMPLE: C

Please note:
The samples may contain inaccuracies in wording and content or shortcomings in the use of standard English conventions.
Many Faiths (Version 2)


Dear Editor,

I am an 8th grade student who recently read the Dalai Lama’s “Many Faiths One Truth.” To respond to this I’d like to say that he was absolutely right. You can see that all five major religions of the world share a common theme of compassion. Since they all share this theme they really should try and come together and relate to each other.

APPENDIX

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Writing Standards in Action Project
www.doe.mass.edu/candi/wsa

Page 5 SAMPLE B8-8b (Opinion/Argument—Letter to the Editor)
like to say that he was absolutely right. You can see that all five major religions of the world share a common theme of compassion. Since they all share this theme they really should try and come together and relate to each other. Even Akbar, an ancient Mughal leader thinks in this way and made huge efforts to make this happen.

In my social studies class we learned about Akbar. He was the greatest and most powerful Mughal king of all time.

**Writing Standards. Grade 8, Standard 1**

**Reading Standards—Informational Text. Grade 8, Standard 1**

**Reading Standards—Informational Text. Grade 8, Standard 8**

**WHST.6-8.1.b**

Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources.

**RI.8.1**

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

**RI.8.8**

Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; recognize when irrelevant evidence is introduced.

**B1 Examples:**

1. The writer provides contextual support for the claim by introducing the ideas of a scholar who made assertions similar to those of the Dalai Lama (In my social studies class we learned about Akbar. He was the greatest and most powerful Mughal king of all time).

**B2 Examples:**

1. The writer cites relevant textual evidence to state the claim made by Akbar (He once said, “It cannot be wise to assert one faith over another.”).
His main goal as king was to spread compassion and tolerance to unite the major religions and find a common ground. He once said, “It cannot be wise to assert one faith over another.” He followed through with this through his years as king and it caused his empire to flourish.

He did the same as the Dalai Lama was trying to get across in his article. All religions can be united through compassion and tolerance.

The Dalai Lama wrote about how he found compassion as a common ground to all religions.

The writer suggests, rather than delineates, Akbar’s argument (His main goal as king was to spread compassion and tolerance to unite the major religions and find a common ground... He did the same as the Dalai Lama was trying to get across in his article. All religions can be united through compassion and tolerance.)

The writer provides additional context for the major claim of the letter (The Dalai Lama wrote about how he found compassion as a common ground to all religions.)

The writer cites abundant relevant evidence from the op-ed to give weight to the claim (He found it in Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. In Hinduism, he found examples such as Baba Amte who founded a leper colony for those who were normally shunned by society. In Islam, an example is the name of their god, which means “Compassionate and Merciful.” For Judaism, he mentions how the Talmud and the Bible both share a theme of compassion, and that you should “love your neighbor as yourself.” He also learned about Jesus’ act of compassion and selfless teachings in Christianity.)

The writer restates the outlines of the Dalai Lama’s argument, giving additional weight to the claim (...all five major can come together and find a common ground. If all these religions would realize this, the world would be able to come together and the world would be much more peaceful.).
He found it in Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. In Hinduism, he found examples such as Baba Amte who founded a leper colony for those who were normally shunned by society. In Islam, an example is the name of their god, which means “Compassionate and Merciful.” For Judaism, he mentions how the Talmud and the Bible both share a theme of compassion, and that you should “love your neighbor as yourself.” He also learned about Jesus’ act of compassion and selfless teachings in Christianity. All of these examples

WHST.6-8.1.c and L.8.3
Use words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

WHST.6-8.1.c
Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.

C1 Examples: 1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5 · 6
The writer enhances style and creates cohesion with a variety of transitional elements that clarify relationships among ideas cited in text-based evidence (In Hinduism, he found... In Islam, an example is... For Judaism, he mentions... He also learned... All of these examples help... If all these religions would realize this...)

C2 Examples: 1 · 2
The writer transitions between adjacent paragraphs by referencing key material from a previous paragraph in the next (Even Akbar, an ancient Mughal leader thinks in this way and made huge efforts to make this happen. In my social studies class we learned about Akbar... He did the same as the Dalai Lama was trying to get across in his article. All religions can be united through compassion and tolerance. The Dalai Lama wrote about how he found compassion as a common ground to all religions.)
help to prove the point that all five major can come together and find a common ground. If all these religions would realize this, the world would be able to come together and the world would be much more peaceful.

This is why I agree with the Dalai Lama. You can clearly see how all major religions share the theme of compassion. It shows they should try and come together and realize this common ground.

Writing Standards. Grade 8, Standard 1

**WHST.6-8.1.e**

Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

Examples: 1

The writer provides a brief conclusion that restates rather than supports the claim. (This is why I agree with the Dalai Lama. You can clearly see how all major religions share the theme of compassion. It shows they should try and come together and realize this common ground.)

Writing Standards. Grade 8, Standard 4

**WHST.6-8.4**

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Overall text reference

The writer produces a suitably formal, concise letter to the editor that makes a clear claim supported by relevant text-based evidence.

Note: Comment refers to the piece as a whole rather than a specific example within the text.
Reading Standards. Grade 8, Standard 6

RH.6-8.6
Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

F1 Examples: 1
The writer identifies with textual evidence Akbar’s point of view regarding religious tolerance and coexistence (His main goal as king was to spread compassion and tolerance to unite the major religions and find a common ground. He once said, “It cannot be wise to assert one faith over another.”).

F2 Examples: 1
The writer identifies with textual evidence the Dalai Lama’s similar point of view regarding religious tolerance and coexistence (The Dalai Lama wrote about how he found compassion as a common ground to all religions.).

Language Standards. Grade 8, Standard 2

L.8.2
Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

G Overall text reference
The writer’s control of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling enhances the clarity of this sample.

Note: Comment refers to the piece as a whole rather than a specific example within the text.