“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.

Dear Ms. Cynthia Lord
Writing Sample Title:
Dear Ms. Cynthia Lord

Text Type and Purpose: Inform / Explain
Grade level/Content area: Grade 8 English Language Arts
Type of Assignment: Letter to an Author
Standards Addressed: (W.8.2), (W.8.4), (W.8.9), (RL.8.1), (L.8.1) (L.8.2), (L.8.3), (L.8.5)

Highlights:
This sample of student work meets grade level standards. It demonstrates the following attributes of effective writing.
The sample:
• Introduces, with some skill, the writer's deep personal engagement with the novel, Rules
• Maintains a clear focus with well-chosen details from the writer's experience and from the novel
• Conveys insightful reflections that portray the writer's increasing understanding of her brother
• Incorporates purposeful sentence constructions that contribute to the writer's voice
• Uses punctuation and text style to create effects
• Includes carefully chosen language to express ideas clearly and concisely
• Maintains a conversational tone appropriate to a friendly letter
Instructional Practices:
Unknown

Assignment Description:
Students participated in a contest by writing personal, reflective letters to the author of a work of fiction or nonfiction about which they had strong feelings. The students’ letters were to explore those feelings and the reasons for their reactions to the author’s work. Students were to write honestly in their own voices and in a conversational style.

Intended Audience:
Teacher; contest judges

Time:
Unknown

Writing Process:
Unknown

Materials:
A work of fiction or nonfiction to use as the letter’s subject; contest participation guidelines

Writing Standards:
Grade 8, Standard 2 (W.8.2)
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.
EXAMPLES: A B C D

Writing Standards:
Grade 8, Standard 4 (W.8.4)
Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
EXAMPLES: E

Writing Standards:
Grade 8, Standard 9 (W.8.9)
Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
EXAMPLES: F

Reading Standards for Literature:
Grade 8, Standard 1 (RL.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.
EXAMPLES: F

Language Standards
Grade 8, Standard 1 (L.8.1)
Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
EXAMPLES: G

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

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

Language Standards:
Grade 8, Standard 5 (L.8.5)
Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
EXAMPLES: J
Dear Ms. Cynthia Lord

Up until I was in fifth grade, when I bought the rubber duck-covered book titled *Rules*, I thought that there was nobody quite like my autistic brother (name of brother). I thought that I was the only girl lucky enough to have a [name of brother] in her life.

The writer thanks the author of the novel, *Rules*, for helping her to clarify her perceptions of her autistic brother. Incorporating carefully chosen details from her own experience and from the novel, the writer organizes the letter around comparisons of herself and her brother to similar characters in *Rules*. The conversational tone, precise word choice, and careful placement of figurative language help to develop sincere and compelling insights. The letter ends with a carefully constructed conclusion that accentuates the writer's earnest voice and the novel's powerful effects on her.

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

Writing. Grade 8, Standard 2:

A  W.8.2.a

Introduce a topic clearly, previewing what is to follow; organize ideas, concepts, and information into broader categories; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., charts, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

A1 A1 Examples: 1

The writer clearly introduces the book, *Rules*, and the reason for its significance to her (Up until I was in fifth grade, when I bought the rubber duck-covered book titled *Rules*, I thought that there was nobody quite like my autistic brother [name of brother]. I thought that I was the only girl lucky enough to have a [name of brother] in her life.).
that I was the only girl lucky enough to have a (name of brother) in her life. I thought that there was nobody who would be able to say that they were going through the same things as (name of brother), or as me. But after reading Rules, I can understand that there are people like (name of brother) with autism. I understood that there are other girls who have a (name of brother). In Rules their names were David and Catherine.

Catherine was a 12-year-old girl who was happy to have her brother, and yet she sometimes couldn’t understand him. Sometimes Catherine just wanted her brother David to be “normal”. I know that [name of brother] is wonderful just the way he is, but I, too, would sometimes wish for that typical brother who everyone I knew took for granted… David, with his perfectly wonderful and unique Frog and Toad language used to communicate with Catherine, was the fictional version of [name of brother]… [name of brother] would try to go to every Boston sporting event, as David loved the video store.).
Sometimes Catherine just wanted her brother David to be “normal”. I know that (name of brother) is wonderful just the way he is, but I, too, would sometimes wish for that typical brother who everyone I knew took for granted.

The brother who I could joke around with; who would hang out with me like my close friend, sometimes my enemy; and who could even understand me like we were one person. But with (name of brother) and me things were different. I never could figure out exactly what to do. How do I make him smile or laugh? Do I truly understand him? I didn't know how to answer those questions before.

Inform / Explain

STANDARDS-BASED COMMENTARY

Writing. Grade 8, Standard 2:
(continued)

B W.8.2.b
Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples.

B1 Examples: 1 · 2 · 3
The writer develops similarities between herself, (name of brother), and characters in Rules with carefully chosen details from her own experience and from the book (…I, too, would sometimes wish for that typical brother who everyone I knew took for granted. The brother who I could joke around with; who would hang out with me like my close friend, sometimes my enemy; and who could even understand me like we were one person… But [name of brother], though he shared David’s smile, has sports as his hobby. And [name of brother] does not use Frog and Toad as his sibling code, [name of brother] uses sports… [name of brother] can recite the final call of the 2004 World Series when the Red Sox won it for the first time in 86 years, just as David could quote a line from Frog and Toad like it was the alphabet.).

B2 Examples: 1 · 2 · 3
The writer expresses strong feelings about Rules with insightful, earnest reflections about the book’s effects on her (I never could figure out exactly what to do. How do I make him smile or laugh? Do I truly understand him? I didn't know how to answer those questions before… Reading Rules was like reading a biography on my brother and me. It was enchanting… Eventually, Catherine realized – and I finally realized – that who my brother is makes him special, and he deserves to be loved for that.).
Inform / Explain

STANDARDS-BASED COMMENTARY

GRADE 8

FRAMEWORK / CONTENT STANDARDS ADDRESSED:
Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for ELA and Literacy (2011)

STANDARD-BASED COMMENTARY

Writing. Grade 8, Standard 2: (continued)

C W.8.2.c
Use appropriate transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts.

C Examples: 1 · 2 · 3 · 4

The writer creates sophisticated transitions from one paragraph to another by hinting at ideas presented in previous paragraphs (Catherine was a 12-year-old girl… I identified David as… When I met David…After Rules…).

D W.8.2.f
Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented.

D Examples: 1

In the cleverly constructed conclusion, the writer acknowledges in an earnest voice the insights and solutions provided by the author of Rules [After Rules I can take a glance at [name of brother]'s face and know exactly what he is thinking. I can see when he wants to stop doing homework and watch the Bruins, Celtics, or Red Sox. I can see how he would do anything to be “normal.” But what I really see now is how [name of brother] is not the typical brother I once fantasized over—he is more. Thank you, Ms. Lord. Without you, there would be no Rules, and without Rules, the puzzle that was once my brother may have never been solved.).
When I met David, I pictured (name of brother)’s smiling face. (name of brother) would try to go to every Boston sporting event, as David loved the video store. (name of brother) can recite the final call of the 2004 World Series when the Red Sox won it for the first time in 86 years, just as David could quote a line from *Frog and Toad* like it was the alphabet.

As for me, I would try to go over to my friend’s house, rather than them coming to mine—as Catherine did—so (name of brother)’s outbursts would be hidden inside of my house. Eventually, Catherine realized—and I finally realized—that who my brother is makes him special, and he deserves to be loved for that.

**Writing. Grade 8, Standard 4:**

**E** W.8.4

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

**E1** Examples: 1 · 2

The writer uses formatting characteristics of a letter (*Dear Ms. Cynthia Lord,… Sincerely,*).

**E2** Examples: 1 · 2 · 3

The writer enhances the conversational style called for in the assignment by italicizing words that emphasize important insights (“But after reading *Rules*, I can understand that there are people like [name of brother] with autism…” “Eventually, Catherine realized—and I finally realized—that who my brother is makes him special, and he deserves to be loved for that…” “But what I really see now is how [name of brother] is not the typical brother I once fantasized over—he is more.”).
After *Rules* I can take a glance at (name of brother)’s face and know exactly what he is thinking. I can see when he wants to stop doing homework and watch the Bruins, Celtics, or Red Sox. But what I *really* see now is how (name of brother) is not the typical brother I once fantasized over—he is more. Thank you, Ms. Lord. Without you, there would be no *Rules*, and without *Rules*, the puzzle that was once my brother may have never been solved.

Sincerely,

(writer’s name)

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Applying *grade 8 Reading Standards to literature*:

**W.8.9.a**

Apply grade 8 Reading Standards to literature.

**RL.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.

**F Examples:** 1 · 2 · 3 · 4

The writer incorporates pertinent information from *Rules* that helps her better understand her brother and her relationship to him. **(But after reading *Rules*, I can understand that there are people like [name of brother] with autism. I understood that there are other girls who have a [name of brother]. In *Rules* their names were David and Catherine... Sometimes Catherine just wanted her brother David to be “normal”. I know that [name of brother] is wonderful just the way he is, but I, too, would sometimes wish for that typical brother... But [name of brother], though he shared David’s smile, has sports as his hobby. And [name of brother] does not use *Frog and Toad* as his sibling code, [name of brother] uses sports. Reading *Rules* was like reading a biography on my brother and me... As for me, I would try to go over to my friend’s house, rather than them coming to mine—as Catherine did—so [name of brother]’s outbursts would be hidden inside of my house. Eventually, Catherine realized—and I finally realized—that who my brother is makes him special, and he deserves to be loved for that.)**
Language. Grade 8, Standard 1:

**L.8.1**
Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

**Examples:** 1 · 2

The writer uses parallelisms in consecutive sentences to emphasize important insights and to express her earnest voice (Up until I was in fifth grade, when I bought the rubber duck-covered book titled *Rules*, I thought that there was nobody quite like my autistic brother [name of brother]. I thought that I was the only girl lucky enough to have a [name of brother] in her life. I thought that there was nobody who would be able to say that they were going through the same things as [name of brother], or as me...I can see when he wants to stop doing homework and watch the Bruins, Celtics, or Red Sox. I can see how he would do anything to be “normal.” But what I really see now is how [name of brother] is not the typical brother I once fantasized over— he is more.).

Language. Grade 8, Standard 2:

**L.8.2.a**
Use punctuation (comma, ellipsis, dash) to indicate a pause or break.

**Examples:** 1 · 2 · 3

The writer indicates breaks in her thoughts by setting off several important insights with dashes (...—as Catherine did—... —and I finally realized—... —he is more.).
**Framework / Content Standards Addressed:**
Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for ELA and Literacy (2011)

**Standards-Based Commentary**

**Language. Grade 8, Standard 3:**

1. **L.8.3**
   Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.

   **I1** Examples: 1 · 2
   - The writer uses quotation marks to express irony: *(Sometimes Catherine just wanted her brother David to be “normal”...I can see how he would do anything to be “normal.”).*

   **I2** Examples: 1
   - The writer forms consecutive rhetorical questions that provide variety and pique readers' interest in what is to follow: *(How do I make him smile or laugh? Do I truly understand him?)*

   **I3** Examples: 1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5
   - The writer chooses language that expresses complicated ideas precisely and concisely: *(...passion...sibling code... final call...outbursts... fantasized...).*

**Language. Grade 8, Standard 5:**

1. **L.8.5**
   Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

   **J** Examples: 1
   - The writer creates a metaphor to express the novel's fundamental effect on her: *(...without Rules, the puzzle that was once my brother may have never been solved.)*