

“What should 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.

# Writing Standards *in Action*

## Grade 8 English Language Arts

### Inform / Explain

*(Letter to an Author)*

Dear Ms. Cynthia Lord



Massachusetts Department of  
ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY  
EDUCATION



# Background Information

GRADE  
8

## FRAMEWORK / CONTENT STANDARDS ADDRESSED:

Massachusetts Curriculum Framework  
for ELA and Literacy (2017)

### 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)

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

### 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

CONTINUED ►



## 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 (2017)* 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)

**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 (e.g., essays, oral reports, biographical feature articles) 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 written analysis, interpretation, reflection, and research, applying one or more grade 8 standards for Reading Literature or Reading Informational Text as needed.

EXAMPLES: **F****Reading Standards for Literature:****Grade 8, Standard 1 (RL.8.1)**

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports analysis of what a text states explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, quoting or paraphrasing as appropriate.

EXAMPLES: **F****Please note:**

The samples may contain inaccuracies in wording and content or shortcomings in the use of standard English conventions.

END OF BACKGROUND ■

STANDARDS ADDRESSED LIST, CONTINUED ►



**List of Standards Addressed,**  
Continued:

**Language Standards:**

**Grade 8, Standard 1 (L.8.1)**

Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking; retain and further develop language skills learned in previous grades.

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**

## STANDARDS-BASED COMMENTARY

### In this sample...

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.

Dear Ms. Cynthia Lord

**E1** Dear Ms. Cynthia Lord, **E1**

**G** **A1** 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

**begin** section **end**

WRITING SAMPLE CONTINUES ▶



### Understanding the Standards-Based Commentary

The student writing sample that begins on this page includes in this column standards-based commentary describing how the writing meets the standards in the *Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy (2017)* and other content frameworks, when applicable. Where they apply, sub-standards marked by letters are included.

Evidence for the commentary is noted in the text of the student writing using color-coded, numbered 'begin' and 'end' arrows.

#### For example:

**A1** marks the beginning and **A1** marks the end of the relevant section in the text.

Please note that the labeled arrows in the text do not necessarily appear in alphabetical order.

### Writing. Grade 8, Standard 2:

#### **A** W.8.2.a

Introduce a topic clearly, previewing what is to follow; use paragraphs and sections to organize ideas, concepts, and information into broader categories; include text features (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.*).

## STANDARDS-BASED COMMENTARY

that I was the only girl lucky enough to have a (*name of brother*) in

her life. **A1** 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. **G** **F** **E2** **A2** But after reading *Rules*,

I can understand that there are people like (name of brother) with

autism. **E2** I understood that there are other girls who have a (*name*

*of brother*). **A2** In *Rules* their names were David and Catherine. **F**

**C** **A3** Catherine was a 12-year-old girl **C** who was happy

to have her brother, and yet she sometimes couldn't understand him.

**Writing. Grade 8, Standard 2:**  
(continued)**A2** A2 Examples: 1

The writer includes relevant evidence from the effects of writer succinctly previews what is to follow (*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].*).

**A3** A3 Examples: 1 · 2 · 3

The writer organizes information around comparisons of herself and her brother to characters in *Rules* (*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.*).

begin section end

WRITING SAMPLE CONTINUES ►



## STANDARDS-BASED COMMENTARY

**I1** **F** Sometimes Catherine just wanted her brother David to be “normal”. **I1** I know that (name of brother) is wonderful just the way he is, but **B1** I, too, would sometimes wish for that typical brother **F** who everyone I knew took for granted. **A3**

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. **B1** But with (name of brother) and me things were different. **B2** I never could figure out exactly what to do. **I2** How do I make him smile or laugh? Do I truly understand him? **I2** I didn’t know how to answer those questions before. **B2**

**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** 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** 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.*)

begin section end

WRITING SAMPLE CONTINUES ►



## STANDARDS-BASED COMMENTARY

C I identified David as C the charming eight-year-old with a wonderful smile and I3 passion I3 for the video store. A3

David, with his perfectly wonderful and unique *Frog and Toad* language used to communicate with Catherine, was the fictional version of (name of brother). A3 F B1 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 I3 sibling code, I3 (name of brother) uses sports. B1 B2 Reading *Rules* was like reading a biography on my brother and me. F B2 It was enchanting. B2

**Writing. Grade 8, Standard 2:**  
(continued)**C W.8.2.c**

Use appropriate and varied transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts.

**C** 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** 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.*).

begin section end

WRITING SAMPLE CONTINUES ►





## STANDARDS-BASED COMMENTARY

**C** When I met David, **C** I pictured (name of brother)'s smiling face. **A3** (name of brother) would try to go to every Boston sporting event, as David loved the video store. **A3** **B1** (name of brother) can recite the **I3** final call **I3** 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. **B1**

**F** As for me, I would try to go over to my friend's house, rather than them coming to mine **H**—as Catherine did—**H** so (name of brother)'s **I3** outbursts **I3** would be hidden inside of my house. **E2** **B2** Eventually, Catherine realized **H**—and I finally realized—**H** that who my brother is makes him special, and he deserves to be loved for that. **B2** **E2** **F**

**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** E1 Examples: 1 • 2

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

**E2** 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.*”).

begin section end

END OF WRITING SAMPLE ■



## STANDARDS-BASED COMMENTARY

**D** **C** After *Rules* **C** I can take a glance at (name of brother)'s face and know exactly what he is thinking. **G** I can see when he wants to stop doing homework and watch the Bruins, Celtics, or Red Sox. **I1** I can see how he would do anything to be "normal." **I1** **E2** But what I *really* see now is how (name of brother) is not the typical brother I once **I3** fantasized **I3** over **H**—he is more. **E2** **G** **H** Thank you, Ms. Lord. Without you, there would be no *Rules*, and **J** without *Rules*, the puzzle that was once my brother may have never been solved. **D** **J**

**E1** Sincerely,

(writer's name) **E1**

**begin** section **end**



**Writing. Grade 8, Standard 9 AND Reading Literature. Grade 8, Standard 1:**

**F** **W.8.9** AND **F** **RL.8.1**

**W.8.9**

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support written analysis, interpretation, reflection, and research, applying one or more grade 8 standards for Reading Literature or Reading Informational Text as needed.

**RL.8.1**

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports analysis of what a text states explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, quoting or paraphrasing as appropriate.

**F** **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.*)

## STANDARDS-BASED COMMENTARY

**Language. Grade 8, Standard 1:****G L.8.1**

Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking; retain and further develop language skills learned in previous grades.

**G** G 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:****H L.8.2.a**

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

**H** H 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.*).

begin section end



## STANDARDS-BASED COMMENTARY

**Language. Grade 8, Standard 3:****I L.8.3**

Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.

**I1** 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** 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** 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:****J L.8.5**

Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

**J** 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.*).

begin section end

