

Literacy Tips



Tips for middle school educators on various topics such as grammar, writing, reading, spelling, vocabulary, cooperative learning and more.

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Tip #44: Test Taking Strategies

Study Skills Online

Our districtwide testing is earlier this year than usual, which is causing many teachers to feel anxious about getting students ready for the Terra Novas and the Benchmarks. There are a lot of test-taking tips and materials at the various schools to help give your students the confidence they need in order to be successful with the testing. One place to start is by going to the ASD home page. Click on "Special Education" under Departments. Then click on their study skills link. There you will find an excellent list of Internet sites, which provide specific resources.

www.asdk12.org/depts/sped/study.asp#test

Write Source 2002 Handbook

The *Write Source 2000* handbook has a chapter devoted to test-taking strategies. Use pp. 373 - 380. You will find suggestions in four areas: preparing for a test, taking a test, taking objective tests, and taking essay tests. Also look in the Write Source 2000 Language Program for support blackline masters.

Benchmark Practice Tests

Most buildings have the 8th Grade Benchmark Practice Tests for you to use. You can always download a PDF file (64 pages) of it from the ASD home page, too. Answers are included. It is well worth your

time to use these practice tests as models. I would recommend doing the reading on one day and the writing on another. Ask your math teammate to do the math practice test and give suggestions to him/her for improving students' open-ended responses. Students need to hear this from more than one person on your team.

www.asdk12.org/depts/assess_eval/benchmark.asp

Preparing for Writing Prompts

One of the best tips you can give your 8th graders is to remind them to spend time prewriting or developing a plan for each writing prompt. No space is devoted to this step in their test booklets, but that doesn't mean they can't do this on scratch paper. Their writing will be much more focused if they spend time on this step. Also talk about test stamina and pacing with the writing portion of the Benchmark. They are asked to write a lot.

Essay Questions

When you have a chance, take a closer look at the Benchmark Practice Test. On the reading portion, there is one open-ended response. On the writing portion, there is an opportunity for students to write an essay. I used these questions and [developed explicit answers for your students to analyze](#). Included are weak, better, and stronger



responses for you to discuss with them. (If you aren't fond of the accordion style writing from *Step Up to Writing*, you may not like these at all...)

Confusing Directions

I also wanted to bring to your attention that some students find the directions for the proofreading questions confusing. On the Benchmark practice test for writing, look closely at Sample C on p. 19. It asks students to find 4 mistakes. How they count the mistakes confuses some students, so take time to go over this with them. Question #21 is another opportunity for you to go over the directions again and point how mistakes are counted. In this question, they ask students to find 6 mistakes. It is really important to show students how to locate the mistakes, how to count them, and how to correct them.

Proofreading Questions

For whatever reason, some of my students never saw the connection between the Daily Oral Language exercises we did in class and the proofreading questions asked of them on standardized testing. Take a moment to remind students during practice testing that the tasks are one in the same. Remember to show them through a think aloud how slowing down their reading rate for proofreading is essential. They catch more errors this way. I also recommend finger/pencil reading. Tracking the text with their finger helps them to slow down, too. Suggest "reading in reverse" for catching spelling errors. (By reading in reverse from the end of the text back to the beginning, one word at a time, they can remove comprehension from their editing process. This strategy does not work for homonyms.)

Good luck with your testing!



READING PRACTICE TEST

On the 8th grade reading practice test, one of the first passages you read is called “Best Friends” by Leslie Hall. You answer five multiple-choice questions and then are asked to write an open-constructed response to the following question:

6. At the end of the story, Jennifer says she had stopped being a friend. Write a paragraph explaining how Jennifer had stopped being a friend and why. Use details from the passage to support your answer.

A weak response:

(Not written as a well-developed paragraph and includes no supporting details from the story.)

Jennifer discovered by the end of the story that she actually had been the weaker friend all along.

A better response:

(Written in paragraph form and includes some supporting details from the story.)

Jennifer discovered by the end of the story that she actually had been the weaker friend all along. She was more concerned with her own jealousy and how she thought Carmen was not paying enough attention to her. She started blaming Carmen for their friendship falling apart. Jennifer should accept part of the blame, too, for not being more interested in her friend’s interests.

A stronger response:

(Written in paragraph form using the accordion style structure. Several supporting details are used from the story.)

Although Jennifer felt Carmen was to blame for their weakening friendship, she eventually discovered that she was part of the problem, too. To begin with, Jennifer did not show any interest in Carmen’s new position on the school newspaper. She was selfish because she was only worried about the time it took away from the two of them. In addition, she wasn’t being a good friend to Carmen when Carmen started experiencing stress with the newspaper and her added responsibility for her little sister. Jennifer found herself angry that Carmen wouldn’t even return her phone calls. Truly, maintaining a good friendship should be two-sided. Both friends need to be understanding and respectful of each other. I think Jennifer learned this in the end after seeing how Carmen honored her artwork in the school’s newspaper.

WRITING PRACTICE TEST

On the 8th grade writing practice test, you are asked to write an essay. The directions look like this:

7. Write a letter to your new pen pal in another country. Introduce yourself and explain what your life is like in Alaska. Your pen pal can be in any country you choose. You do not have to use all of the lines.

A weak response:

(Not a multi-paragraph essay like the checklist suggests. More than one topic is addressed and none of them thoroughly. No prewriting plan was done in advance.)

Dear Pierre,

My name is John and I live in Anchorage, Alaska. I guess we are now pen pals, which is kind of cool since I don't know anything about Paris, France. Do you live near the Eiffel Tower? Do you speak any English? I am taking French as an elective, but I don't know enough yet to write an entire letter in French. Do you like Paris? I like Alaska. I have lived here my whole life.

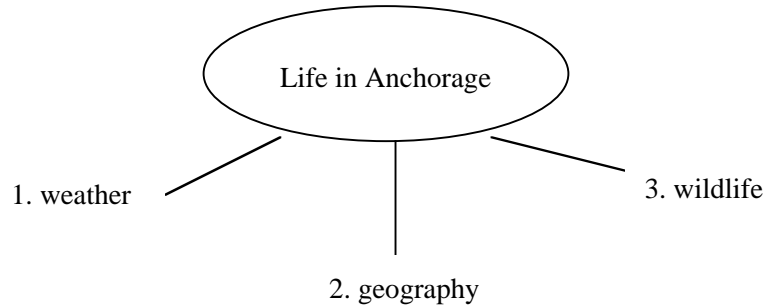
Hope you write back soon!

Your friend,

John

A better response:

(This is a multi-paragraph essay, which includes a thesis statement at the end of the introduction to help the reader focus on the three characteristics of Anchorage. Each body paragraph focuses on one topic but lacks transitions and enough support. The essay has a conclusion. The student created a prewriting plan before beginning.)



Dear Pierre,

My name is John, and I live in Anchorage, Alaska. Anchorage is a city of over 250,000 people. I was born here, and I think it is one of the most beautiful places in the world. ***The weather, the geography, and the wildlife make Anchorage a unique place to live.***

Anchorage can have huge extremes in its weather. Winters are really cold, and we feel lucky when we get a lot of snow. Summers are mild but never really hot. We get very little sunlight during the winter and long days of sunshine in the summer.

The geography of Anchorage is interesting. Anchorage is surrounded by Cook Inlet on one side and the Chugach Mountains on the other. We have a lot of parks, too.

The wildlife in Anchorage is pretty cool. I see moose a lot especially in my backyard. They are huge, and you don't want to get too close to them. I haven't seen too many bears. Our fishing is incredible. There is even a creek in downtown Anchorage where you can go salmon fishing!

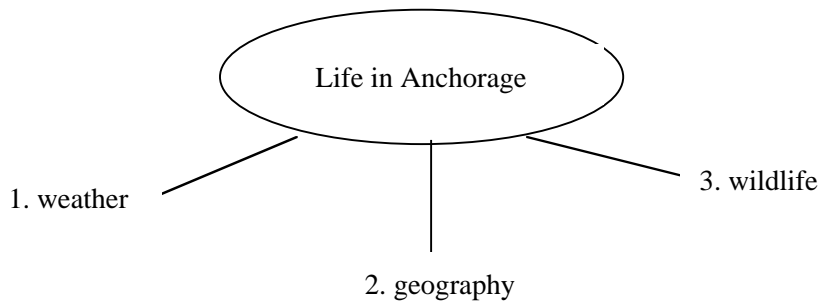
I hope to learn a lot about Paris by being your pen pal, Pierre. I imagine Paris and Anchorage must have some things in common. I can't wait to hear from you!

Your friend,

John

A stronger response:

(This is a multi-paragraph essay, which includes a thesis statement at the end of the introduction to help the reader focus on the three characteristics of Anchorage. Each body paragraph uses transition words and includes plenty of "explains" for support. The essay has a conclusion. The student created a prewriting plan before beginning.)



Dear Pierre,

My name is John, and I live in Anchorage, Alaska. Anchorage is a city of over 250,000 people, which surprises a lot of people. It really is urban although most of the rest of the state is rural and remote. I was born here, and I think it is one of the most beautiful places in the world. ***The weather, the geography, and the wildlife certainly make Anchorage a unique place to live.***

In order to really understand Anchorage, you must first know a little bit about the extreme weather. In summer, Anchorage gets over 18 hours a daylight each day; however, winter days bring only 5 hours of daylight. Along with the extremes in sunlight come the extremes in temperature. Anchorage summer days are around 65 – 70 degrees, which makes it great for any kind of activity. In winter, we get a lot of snow and temperatures that are pretty reasonable until those clear, cold fronts come through when we dip down below 0.

In addition, the geography of Anchorage is surprising. On the east we are surrounded by the Chugach Mountains. On the west, Cook Inlet wraps around the city. On clear days across the inlet you can see other distant mountain ranges and even Denali, the largest mountain in North America.

Finally, people here have to learn to coexist with the wildlife. Seeing moose is a daily event. I can't even tell you how many times I have seen moose on the roads or even in my own backyard. Bear sightings are more rare. When I mountain bike on the trails, I try to make a lot of noise and ride with friends to play it safe. I see eagles every now and then, and the beluga whales in the inlet are so cool. The fishing can't be beat. I promise to send you a picture in my next letter of the king salmon I caught last summer.

I truly hope to learn a lot about Paris by being your pen pal, Pierre. I imagine Paris and Anchorage must have some things in common. I can't wait to hear from you!

Your friend,

John