

# Writing

In order to write in a way that's clear and convincing, writers need to work hard to find just the right words, sentence structure and logical sequences. So, whether they're writing about their own experience or the book they're reading, students in the Amplify program are always writing to figure out what they've seen, what they've felt, and what they've thought about a subject that matters to them—trying to find just the right words to show their readers what they really mean.

## What do students write about?

The earliest lessons in each unit give students the chance to feel what it's like to come up with something interesting to say—and to see how people respond when they share it. And the lessons that follow are sequenced to draw students into more complex work with text, building on fundamental skills like focus—so that students can move from focusing on a moment in experience to focusing on a moment in text. Students move from unit to unit, building momentum and understanding, because they do not need to learn a whole new set of skills. They might, for example, start by writing about one moment from their experience when they felt uncomfortable, and soon shift into writing about one specific passage from a Sherlock Holmes story in which he seems to know something that Watson does not—without feeling that they're starting from scratch with a new set of tools.

Students begin learning about writing as an opportunity to express a particular point of view, to “show” a reader how they observe the world. Very quickly though, in the first unit, Amplify's writing instruction transitions students to describe precisely what someone *else*, the author of a text, seems to be suggesting about the world. Of course the two modes of writing are not in opposition: The student most often writes about what *he* or *she* thinks *the author* means.

Amplify's daily writing prompts and essays provide students with ample practice in the three types of writing called out in the CA CCSS, focusing particularly on the first two, making an argument and conveying information.

## In what format are students writing?

**(Almost) daily writing prompts:** It is not easy to explain what the author means in a precise way, maybe even point out something original, and tie it back to the text in a smooth sentence. That is why Amplify's lessons, typically about two times a week, ask students to spend 10-15 minutes practicing this sort of writing and producing at least 120 words during this time period in sixth grade, 130 in seventh and 140 in eighth. In the early lessons of a unit, students typically use that whole time to explore just one moment in the text and in later lessons, they consider connections between multiple moments in one text and among two or more texts.

When students are responding to these almost daily writing prompts, they make quick progress in the “Writing Skills” described in the following sections. The format stays the same, so students don't waste time wondering if they are following directions properly and can, instead, focus on the text and their ideas about it. Teachers can easily compare one piece of writing to another and track progress—looking for patterns in several pieces of work, instead of making snap decisions based on only one performance.

**Essays:** This regular practice responding to these prompts enables students to produce paragraphs that can then serve as the building blocks of the end-of-unit essays. The essay subunits then focus instruction on the additional challenge of producing a sequence of body paragraphs around the same topic or theme, sequencing and connecting body paragraphs, formulating transitions between them, writing introductions that capture their logic, and creating conclusions that capture the meaning of it all.

### Categories of writing skills

Unlike the reading skills, the writing skills are sequenced—with some skills and habits being taught as prerequisites to others. This sequence has been developed over two decades of testing with students and teachers to figure out the most efficient route to making progress. Teachers don't have to memorize the descriptions that follow: The lessons direct teachers to introduce the skills in the most efficient order. However, it is helpful for teachers to understand the sequence so that they will feel comfortable with the instruction and so that if students struggle later on, they can consider that an earlier skill may not have been sufficiently developed.

The most important and first prerequisite writing skill or habit, of course, is to produce writing. No one will become a better writer unless he or she practices a lot. Most teachers report lack of productivity as their number one frustration with student writing. And, frankly, it is impossible to be sure whether students have mastered a skill, if they are only producing a few sentences. Thus, the first 10 days of instruction in Amplify's program are designed to set up the habits and routines of a productive classroom community—most essentially, making sure that every student can produce 120-140 words (depending on the grade) in 10-15 minutes. Because the program is digital, students and teachers can easily see whether or not the goal is being met, and in case anyone is in doubt, Amplify produces visualizations daily that show the teacher what percentage of her class is meeting the goal. The sequence of 10 lessons that leads to success in this goal for every student has been refined over two decades and establishes a unique foundation for accelerated progress throughout the rest of the Amplify curriculum.

An overview of the skills are described below, but to gain a more thorough understanding, please see descriptions in the unit, sub-unit, and lesson briefs—particularly in the first unit.

Like the reading skills, the writing skills are organized into categories. The writing skills are measurable capacities that teachers can track in students' daily writing using Amplify's rubrics. These skills align with those measured in SBAC's year-end writing tests. They are also skills for which Amplify has designed simple and effective interventions to respond to reports on students' progress.

The "habits" are behaviors that Amplify's lesson routines will help teachers and students establish in the classroom and continue to use during independent work beyond the classroom. These regular behaviors enable students to practice the writing skills and to make accelerated progress during independent work and within the writing community of the classroom.

**Writing skills:**

1. **Focus:** To write exclusively about one moment or idea in order to fully develop it (developed as a precursor to working on the skill of “logical structure”)
2. **Logical Structure:** The organization of sentences, paragraphs, and sections to strengthen and clarify the sequence of events, the focus of the paragraph, the overall argument, and/or the desired impact on the reader
3. **Showing:** To use descriptive details and precise verbs to create a vivid picture in the reader’s mind (developed as a precursor to working on the skills of “use of evidence”)
4. **Use of Evidence:** Selecting, describing, and explaining quoted or paraphrased details from a text to develop and support an idea
5. **Conventions:** Use of grammar and sentence mechanics to control the clarity and power of sentences (students work on this skill once they are producing at least 100 words and scoring at least a 3 in “focus.”)

**Writing habits:**

1. **Produce writing:** Write regularly for 12–15 minutes in response to a prompt.
2. **Observe:** Note the details of what catches your attention.
3. **Share:** Present a piece of writing to an audience.
4. **Respond:** Comment on one specific part of a piece of writing by identifying what worked and describing the impact it made.
5. **Revise:** Add, delete, or reorganize a piece of writing.

**Writing skills and habits as seen in Amplify’s lessons:**

1. **Focus:** Students select one specific moment or idea, and develop this moment or idea exclusively.  
For example:
  - Throughout the unit on Roald Dahl’s *Boy*, students practice slowing down to write about a single, small moment that really grabbed their attention—instead of skimming quickly through a list of moments.
  - In one of the *A Raisin in the Sun* lessons, students explore just *one thing* a character wants in a particular scene, instead of trying to cover all of the many things that are going on.
2. **Showing:** Students use descriptive details and precise verbs to create a vivid picture in the reader’s mind.  
For example:
  - In one of the personal narrative lessons, students write a scene where one character has to communicate a particular emotion through dialogue and physical description, without ever naming the emotion.
  - In another personal narrative lesson, students choose verbs that will describe not only what the character *does*, but will also convey how he or she *feels*.

**3. Use of evidence:** Students select and describe quoted or paraphrased details from a text to develop and support an idea.

For example:

- In one of the *A Raisin in the Sun* lessons, students select specific details from the play that reveal how a character feels about his or her situation; in their writing, they identify that feeling and then explain how those details illustrate that specific feeling.
- In a lesson on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," students practice reasoning with evidence, using the same few sentences from the story, but placing emphasis on distinct details in order to develop two very different ideas about the character.

**4. Logical structure:** Students organize sentences, paragraphs, and sections to strengthen and clarify the sequence of events, the focus of the paragraph, the overall argument, and/or the desired impact on the reader.

For example:

- When writing culminating essays, students first develop their idea in the body of their essay before drafting an introduction in which they need to be able to express this idea clearly.
- Students write essays at the end of each unit. The essays that students write in the early units focus on developing convincing and clear body paragraphs and compelling introductions. Students become so practiced in these parts of the essay, that they internalize the logic and do not have to follow a formula; later essays focus on writing effective conclusions so that by the end of each year, students are writing compelling and complete essays that are not formulaic.

**5. Conventions:** This set of skills involving grammar and sentence mechanics enables writers to control how clearly and powerfully their sentences communicate what they mean.

For example:

- See the section on grammar that follows which describes Amplify's broad and deep approach for building students' ability to use and understand grammar and sentence mechanics during class and independent work.
- The teacher has access to three levels of grammar activities in *Mastering Conventions* that contain over 1,000 pages of grammar instruction and activities for a variety of levels, including remediation down to students working at the third-grade level.
- Since different students possess very different fluency with conventions, most units contain Flex Days that allow the teacher to give each student instruction in and practice with the specific grammatical skills he or she needs to master.

### Writing habits

- 1. Produce writing:** At least two times per week, students respond to a prompt with 120-140 words (depending on the grade) describing their idea about a piece of text.
  - The first 10 lessons are focused on making sure every student is moving toward this goal and can meet it in a tight time frame of 10-15 minutes, with daily reports to the teacher about the percent of her class that is achieving this goal.
  - Students often spend the first part of a lesson exploring the text from a variety of angles so that when they see the writing prompt, they have knowledge, and often literally, pieces of text, at their fingertips from which to write the prompt.
  - Writing warm-ups are very efficient; they simply help students locate what they know, what they think, what they can visualize, what evidence they have ready to go based on their earlier work.
- 2. Observe:** Students begin the year with exercises designed to get them to pinpoint the unique details that make up their perspective on even mundane events.
  - Soon, they move into doing activities with text that help them pick out particular qualities and details and analyze them in a variety of ways—often visually or with drama.
  - Teachers have many tools to spontaneously recognize students' unique observations, including private in-line feedback directly on students' digital writing and a Spotlight App to publicly highlight student writing on a projected digital Word Wall.
- 3. Share:** Every time students respond to a prompt, the class hears at least two students' versions in order to maintain the vitality and spontaneity of a writing community and provide immediate and authentic feedback.
  - A structured protocol that students learn and practice in the first 10 days of lessons ensures that this time is safe and productive.
  - Teachers must make sure that every student shares his or her work within a three-four week period; it is absolutely key for students to feel that they are trying to communicate their ideas with each other.
- 4. Respond:** During sharing sessions, students are responsible for listening carefully enough to their peers' writing that they can comment on a specific section of the piece that made an impact on them.
  - The sharing protocol trains students to call on each other for responses after they are finished reading their own work. Once the process is working well, the teacher can simply watch and coach, asking for more specificity when necessary (and cutting off any negativity).
  - Noticing the impact of language in each other's pieces trains students for close reading.
- 5. Revise:** Students practice revising small bits of their writing about every five days—just to practice what it feels like to change a piece of writing, notice the impact of applying a particular skill, and develop the discernment to recognize whether a piece has improved or not.
  - These Revision Assignments happen on lessons called Flex Days during which teachers can choose from several different skills in order to differentiate for various students, depending on how they are performing on their daily writing.
  - While writing essays, students use this revision skill to actually improve a piece of writing over several drafts.