



City of Pure Water: A Place-Based Argumentative Writing Unit

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Abstract

This 9th and 10th grade multimodal writing unit takes a place-based approach to argumentative writing. Over ten lessons, students explore a local environmental issue through teacher-curated text sets before working with a partner to create a visual essay arguing for a community-based solution. The unit was originally designed and implemented in an Intensive Reading/English Language Arts combination classroom and aims to support and scaffold diverse learners. The unit is aligned to both 9th-10th Grade Common Core and Florida BEST standards on argumentation and organization. The goal of the unit is to foster students' abilities to write and develop specific claims in their arguments.

Keywords

Intensive Reading, multimodal writing, argument, water crisis, place-based learning

I originally developed and implemented this unit for my 9th and 10th grade Intensive Reading/English Language Arts combination courses. My students in these courses include English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with a diverse set of disabilities, including specific learning disabilities and language impairments. Aware of how often these students are discussed only in the context of achievement gaps and learning loss, I wanted to create a writing unit that focused on the strengths of my students, rather than their perceived weaknesses, and to create an opportunity for my students to speak for themselves. To start, I reflected on how I could bring my students' lived experiences into the classroom.

I am privileged to live and teach along the Gulf Coast of Florida around the Hillsborough River Watershed, a confluence of ancient water sources that has supported human communities for at least 12,000 years (Cooper, 2011). Water, here, is both a constant and a contradiction. Our community faces regular flooding during the rainy season. At the same time, rapid construction has created a water crisis. The communities in the Hillsborough River Watershed are running out of usable water, while being inundated by flooding and violent storm surges. My students live in this tension. They are frustrated by the rapid construction in our rural area but also depend on it for income. They know our water is needed for our agricultural economy but also that the water is polluted by fertilizer runoff. They love a day at the beach but also know the dangers of the hurricanes that come off the Gulf. Therefore, taking a place-based approach in designing this unit—that is, a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the local community and its environment in students' learning—challenged my students to consider how we navigate that tension (Martusewicz et al., 2021).

My goal in using a place-based approach was to facilitate conversations students were already having about the issues impacting their lives. I considered what questions and concerns they brought to my classroom and compiled a list of local environmental issues for students to choose from, including hurricanes, our local Harmful Algal Bloom (HAB) known as red tide, and drought-induced sinkholes. Taking a place-based approach also lessened the amount of Tier 3 vocabulary my ELLs and students with disabilities would need to learn. These were words they were experiencing and living.

Narrative Framing

For this unit, I decided that students would work collaboratively in pairs in order to encourage my ELL students to practice speaking and listening. In addition, I wanted students to learn from each other and share their lived experiences. I asked students to work together to identify and argue for a community-based solution to an environmental issue with a local impact. So often the discussion on hurricane preparation ends with a checklist of materials for the individual to collect. Instead, I wanted students to think about what solutions could be enacted on the community level to better prepare all of us for hurricanes. Likewise, I wanted students to think about what changes could be made to mitigate red tide's impacts on our community, rather than issue another warning for individuals to avoid the beach during a bloom.

A couple years prior, a colleague had shared the outlining method called "[The Tree of Reasoning](#)," one I had used before with students to some success (Pavich 2016). I thought I could take the visual outline and repurpose it into a visual essay, encouraging my students' visual and spatial creativity. In taking a multimodal approach to argumentative writing, I asked my students to thoughtfully combine words with a visual structure, illustrating the coherence of their argument.

First, we practiced breaking apart an argument in a common anchor text using the tree structure. We identified the argument's trunk (or thesis statement), then its branches (or reasoning), and the leaves (or the evidence). For this exercise, I used an [article from the local newspaper](#) on how our county's largest city—where some of my students reside—is addressing the usable water shortage by issuing a building moratorium. This allowed us the opportunity to practice not only argumentation, but also how to have a productive dialogue around a difficult topic.

Next, I provided students with a choice of text sets, each representative of an environmental issue with local impacts. Each text set included multimodal texts with audio and visual supports to be more accessible for my diverse learners. Likewise, the multimodal elements of their final product helped scaffold students' writing to best demonstrate their knowledge of argumentation and the issue being discussed. My students focused on writing their three claims with clear logical and research-backed evidence with the visual structures they designed acting as logographic cues, replacing the need for additional language like transitional words and phrases. Using

the tree of reasoning as inspiration, they illustrated the coherency of their arguments. The shape of a hurricane wove claims and evidence together as students argued for things like mangrove restorations and changes to residential construction codes as a means of preparing for hurricanes. Diagrams of the Tampa Bay estuary emphasized the relationship between red tide and the need to prevent fertilizer run-off. Sinkholes highlighted the urgent need for drought reduction measures. All in all, the visual and spatial aspects of their multimodal writing supported the linguistic aspects, helping grow my students' confidence as writers.

At a Glance

Title	<i>City of Pure Water: A Place-Based Argumentative Writing Unit</i>
Unit Time	<i>10, 55-minute instructional blocks</i>
Grade Level(s)	<i>Grades 9-10</i>
Core Text	Tampa Times Article: "Zephyrhills to halt new development as water availability evaporates"
Supporting Texts	<i>Students will then choose one curated text set focused on their selected topic.</i>
Climate Literacy Terms	Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs); red tide; hurricanes; storm surge, watershed, drought, erosion, sinkholes
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students will work together collaboratively to identify and argue for community-based solutions to an environmental issue with local impacts. ● Students will be able to construct a logical and coherent argument using a visual structure.
Materials and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Unit Scope & Sequence and Example Text Sets ● Poster paper ● Color pencils, crayons, and/or markers ● Digital or paper access to text sets for students

Going Forward

The second year I taught this unit, my grade level team adapted it and expanded on it to work across the 10th grade, including honors and on-level classes. The visual essay was reframed as a Public Service Announcement and the proper application of rhetorical appeals was emphasized. Students were expected to not only construct a coherent text using both writing and logographic cues, but also to consider pathos in designing their visuals, logos in writing out their reasonings, and ethos in referencing their sources. In addition, students were encouraged to use rhetorical devices, like antithesis, to write a tagline for their campaign. My grade level team also expanded the list of topics to include other local environmental issues. This unit could also be expanded to include time for students to research their selected issue on their own.

Both years I taught this unit, students selected their topic based on the issue they felt posed the most significant threat to their own quality of life. Students with asthma worked on solutions to red tide. Likewise, students frightened by past hurricanes made plans to weaken future storms. As a result, their visual essays became powerful testimonies of the potential in our community to navigate the tension between our impact and our dependence on our environment. The creativity and resiliency my students demonstrated in their writing gives me hope that they will continue to use their voices to advocate for themselves and our home.

References

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