

Persuasion Across Time and Space: Analyzing and Producing Persuasive Texts

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Who created this unit, and how was it developed?

The unit was designed for the Understanding Language (UL) Initiative by WestEd’s Teacher Professional Development Program. The authors of the unit are Aída Walqui, Nanette Koelsch, and Mary Schmida, all of WestEd. While developing the unit, the authors collaborated with UL’s English Language Arts (ELA) Working Group: George C. Bunch (Chair), Martha Inez Castellón, Margaret Heritage, Susan Pimentel, Lydia Stack, and Aída Walqui.

As the unit was created, the UL ELA Working Group developed [Guidelines for ELA Instructional Materials Development](#). These Guidelines are designed to help articulate what the unit is meant to illustrate, and to assist teachers and others in developing their own classroom lessons and units that similarly support English Language Learners (ELLs) in meeting the Common Core ELA standards. The Guidelines and the unit itself are based on theory and research as outlined in a number of papers prepared for the January, 2012, Understanding Language Conference at Stanford University, which are available at <http://ell.stanford.edu/papers/practice>. More information about the rationale for the unit, as well as the foundations on which it was designed, can be found in the [Unit Introduction](#).

2. What role did teachers play in the development of the unit, and has it been taught in “real” classrooms?

The unit has benefited greatly from the input of teachers and other educators at multiple stages of its development. After the completion of the first draft of the unit in the spring of 2012, UL’s ELA workgroup collaborated with the [Council of the Great City Schools](#) to invite teachers and other personnel from ten school districts around the country (the School District of Palm Beach County [FL], Charlotte-Mecklenburg [NC] Schools, Boston [MA] Public Schools, Bellingham [WA] Public Schools, Seattle [WA] Public Schools, New York City [NY] Department of Education, Chicago [IL] Public Schools, Broward County [FL] Public Schools, Oakland [CA] Unified School District, and Denver [CO] Public Schools) to review the unit and offer comments, critique, and suggestions for improvement. During the summer of 2012, several teachers in two districts (New York City and Oakland) pre-piloted the unit in ELA classrooms with ELLs as part of their summer sessions.

We are currently preparing a document that will summarize teacher input and discuss how that input was incorporated into the development of the unit. Plans are also currently underway with the Council of Great City Schools for three other large districts (Denver, Chicago, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg) to pilot the final version of the unit during the winter and spring of 2013. We will post comments from those teachers, along with classroom video clips and student work samples completed during the unit as they become available.

3. Is this an English Language Arts (ELA) Unit or an English Language Development (ELD)/English as a Second Language (ESL) unit?

The unit is intended to develop students' ability to participate in the kinds of practices called for by the ELA standards and concurrently to promote the development of proficiency in English. It aims to illustrate how instruction based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in ELA can be designed to accelerate language and literacy development simultaneously with ELA content learning for ELLs at the intermediate level of English language proficiency or above. Another major goal is to demonstrate that ELLs are capable of carrying out the high level of intellectual engagement called for by the new standards, if students are adequately supported by knowledgeable teachers, and supports are strategically and gradually removed to build students' independence. The pedagogical and conceptual shifts on which the unit is based (see the [Unit Introduction](#)) call for a rethinking of traditional views of language learning and teaching. Language instruction should prepare ELLs to engage with the types of practices, texts, writing, and conversations that are valued in the various disciplines, in this case English Language Arts. The unit is specifically designed for 7th grade middle school ELA classrooms that consist of a combination of ELLs (at the intermediate level or higher) and mainstream students, or exclusively of ELLs (at the intermediate level or higher).

4. What about “newcomers” and other beginning-level English Language Learners?

This unit was designed for students who have reached at least an intermediate level of proficiency in English (e.g., about Level 3 in the [Framework for English Language Development Proficiency Standards](#)). Beginning-level ELLs should be placed in an appropriate ELD/ESL class that is taught by instructors credentialed in that area and that builds a foundation for students to engage in the kinds of language and literacy practices called for by the CCSS and exemplified in the unit.

The *Understanding Language* Initiative is currently exploring alternatives for illustrating high-quality ELD/ESL instruction that supports beginning-level ELLs' development of the language and literacy skills necessary to meet new common standards in ELA as well as other subject areas.

5. Why did you choose to do a unit on persuasion?

Although the Common Core ELA standards emphasize *argument* more than *persuasion*, we chose to develop the unit around students' engagement with, and creation of, persuasive texts for a number of reasons. First, as Aristotle pointed out thousands of years ago, it is important to remember that "argument" is one of three means by which writers and speakers appeal to audiences. The ELA Standards emphasize *logos*, the marshaling of evidence to support a claim; our ELA unit provides experiences for students to examine how authors do so and give students opportunities to construct their own arguments. But our unit also introduces students to the two other Aristotelian appeals, *ethos* (the mechanisms that authors use to establish their own credibility) and *pathos* (how writers and speakers appeal to the emotions of their audience). In these ways, a focus on persuasive texts addresses and transcends the ELA standards' focus on argument alone.

Focusing the unit on persuasive texts, especially in the form of advertisements and speeches, also allows teachers to invite students to begin to experience and analyze various aspects of textual complexity using texts (or types of texts) that they are more familiar with, and then lead students to further develop their understanding of text complexity using increasingly less familiar (and more challenging) texts throughout the unit. Finally, we chose persuasive advertisements and speeches for the unit because such texts are often engaging, expressive, and complex (making them fertile ground for second language development as well as meeting the Standards), as well as historically and culturally important (thus providing opportunities for ELs to learn more about the United States).

6. There has been some debate regarding the extent to which students' background knowledge should be activated and built upon before engaging in "close reading" of a text. What position does this unit take?

The unit provides multiple opportunities for students to engage in "close reading" of text, and opportunities are provided for students to use the kind of "text-dependent questions" that have been advocated for by writers of the ELA standards (see, for example, Activity 5 in Lesson 2 – Close Reading). It is crucial that ELLs, like all students, have opportunities to engage with texts in ways that require them to read carefully and grapple with textual meaning. At the same time, reading always involves the use of background knowledge to comprehend and interpret text. Because ELLs are reading in a language that they are still in the process of learning, they rely particularly heavily on background knowledge to make sense of the texts that they are confronting. It is likely that ELLs, by virtue of either being new to the United States or of being subject to inequitable prior education, may have less background knowledge specifically related to certain texts than do their mainstream classmates.

For these reasons, each lesson in the unit provides activities designed to “prepare learners” by activating students’ knowledge and interest and building just enough background knowledge for them to engage closely and meaningfully with the target texts. The unit demonstrates that leveraging students’ existing knowledge and building new knowledge can be accomplished in a number of ways before and during a lesson or unit of study—without preempting the text, translating its contents for students, telling students what they will learn in advance of reading a particular text, or “simplifying” the text itself.

7. Why isn’t vocabulary “frontloaded” by teaching key words explicitly before each lesson and activity?

Responding to limitations in the effectiveness of teaching vocabulary words in isolation, the unit is designed to exemplify how vocabulary can be addressed explicitly in meaningful ways throughout instruction. Across the unit, activities develop students’ ability to understand key terms in context, to focus on their multiple meanings, and to review key vocabulary learned in the lesson. A number of tasks also involve students in focused reading, which helps them engage with vocabulary beyond their current level of comprehension. At times, key terms are introduced in context (see, for example, the Extended Anticipatory Guides used in Lessons 1 and 3).

A deliberate attempt has also been made to develop students’ tolerance for ambiguity, as well as their ability to become willing and accurate predictors of meaning, two long-known attributes of good second language learners. Such strategies will serve ELLs well in dealing with unknown vocabulary in settings outside the unit, both in other classes and outside of school.

8. Why aren’t there separate content and language objectives for each lesson?

The objectives for this unit are based on the CCSS ELA standards and address the language and literacy skills and practices valued in that content area. These objectives revolve around how to draw ELLs into engaging in ELA and literacy practices by having them use language to communicate with different audiences, for purposes. The danger in separating “content objectives” from “language objectives” is that language instruction can come to be seen as an endeavor isolated from disciplinary practice, rather than integrated into it.

9. Don’t English Learners have unique language needs that should be addressed in the unit?

It is true that ELLs often have communicative needs that are not shared by monolingual English-speaking students who engage competently in academic practices in English. One way of understanding what language-related practices ELLs at various levels of

English language proficiency might be developing is described in the ELPD Framework from the Council of Chief State School Officers (http://www.ccsso.org/Resources/Publications/The_Common_Core_and_English_Language_Learners.html).

As teachers consider the language needs of ELLs, two important considerations are necessary to keep in mind. First is the question of how the competence of ELLs to participate in these valued academic practices develops. Our position is that students are socialized into these practices by being invited, with support, to engage in activity that reflects those practices. ELLs, like fully proficient English users, need to engage in the kinds of practices valued in the various disciplines—for example, the masterful use of English in ELA/literacy activities. They need to be invited to participate, have their own activity be valued and supported, and know that what they are doing, while it may not be perfect, is an approximation of what they will soon master and surpass. The unit demonstrates that as ELLs participate in such practices, it is possible to focus explicitly on language as a resource for meaning making and engagement.

The second point to keep in mind is that native speakers must also learn to engage competently in academic practices in English. Thus, while this unit has been designed with ELLs in mind, we propose that all students can benefit from their engagement in the unit, and that as all students participate in the activities proposed, they will all gain, albeit differentially.

10. What about assessment for each lesson in the unit?

Ongoing assessment of student learning throughout the unit is key to student success. Assessment opportunities are integrated into each lesson so that both teachers and students can engage in a process of continuously taking stock of learning during the lesson. For example, in Lesson 1, clear performance criteria for an effective persuasive essay are provided for the teacher and students. The students can use these criteria to monitor and adjust their own learning and the teacher can use them to provide feedback to the students about their writing as it is developing. In other lessons, instructional activities offer assessment opportunities. For instance, in Lesson 2, questions are provided for the teacher to support students' close reading of *The Gettysburg Address*. Student responses to the questions and their ensuing discussions can provide substantive insights into the students' reading comprehension and the language they use to convey ideas.

While it is important for teachers to gather evidence of learning so they can take the necessary action to keep learning moving forward, students are equal stakeholders in the assessment process. Included in several lessons are rubrics for students to judge their own and their peers' participation and products. Students can also be encouraged to reflect on their own learning as the lesson is progressing or at the end of the lesson.

Teachers can ask questions to guide the reflections. For example, one strategy might be to use stoplights—green, yellow, or red circles posted in the classroom—for students to post their reflections about their learning to prompts at the end of the lesson. Prompts might include:

- **Green:** Today, I learned...
- **Yellow:** Today, I considered a question...on an idea or new perspective
- **Red:** Today my learning stopped because...

Student responses to such prompts become an additional source of evidence for teachers to use. In addition students can be encouraged to provide constructive feedback to their peers during the instructional activities. For example, when students share out responses to the group, the teacher could invite feedback from peers that helps clarify or elaborate thinking, or suggests different perspectives for the group to consider.