

Jenny Beasley’s Editorial Unit

Jenny Beasley’s sixth-grade students spend approximately four to six weeks writing editorials on self-selected topics. The unit begins with a discussion of the various communities to which the students belong—family, school, neighborhood, town. Then, based on their own opinions and interests, the students choose issues confronting one of these communities, formulate positions on the issues, identify their audiences and purposes, and begin developing support for their positions. The unit culminates with polished editorials that reflect the children’s increasing knowledge of effective persuasive strategies and techniques.

Instructional Goals

Jenny’s editorial unit helps her students understand how persuasive writing works—whether they are reading someone else’s persuasive piece or writing their own. When the unit is completed, students are able to:

- Identify an author’s purpose in a persuasive piece.
- Recognize the appropriateness of an argument for an intended audience.
- Establish and maintain a purpose in their own writing.
- Communicate with a targeted audience.
- Develop and support main ideas.
- Create unity by organizing ideas in a meaningful order.
- Use effective sentences and appropriate language.
- Follow standard writing conventions in both mechanics and documentation of sources.

Materials

During the course of the unit, Jenny uses the following classroom materials:

- Multiple samples of student writing from previous classes
- Slicing the Pie
- Defining the Writing Task
- Analyzing Your Audience
- Types of Support
- Survey Form
- Ways To Organize a Problem/Solution Piece
- Things a Writer Might Do in an Introduction
- Possible Purposes of a Conclusion
- Editorial Scoring Guide
- Reflections

The editorial is the second persuasive piece Jenny’s students write, the first being a proposal related to some aspect of their school community. To prepare her students for this first persuasive assignment, Jenny used two techniques described in Stephanie Harvey’s *Nonfiction Matters: Reading, Writing, and Research in Grades 3-8*, a book she highly recommends. Her students walked around the school, recording ideas in their writer’s notebooks; and then Jenny displayed a “Name/Topic/Resource Chart” in her room so students could share their ideas.

Description of Unit

When Jenny's class began writing their editorials, the students had recently written proposals to change or add something to their school. So, much of the groundwork for persuasive writing had already been done. During the earlier unit, the class had extensive discussions about choosing support for a position based on an analysis of audience. They also read and analyzed many sample proposals, including proposals written by other sixth-graders.

After a brief review of the material covered in the proposal unit, Jenny's students expanded their consideration of community beyond their school and began to discuss and analyze how editorials can affect community opinions and open the door to change. Once again, Jenny and the students read and discussed many writing samples, including newspaper editorials as well as student work.

After using Slicing the Pie to brainstorm possible subjects, each student chose a topic, narrowed it to a focused purpose, and identified a targeted audience, someone who disagreed, but who might be persuaded to change his mind. At this point, the students recorded their choices on a Defining the Writing Task form. They also were asked to answer questions about their audience in writing (see Analyzing Your Audience).

Talking and writing about the targeted audience led naturally into a discussion of how writers support their positions in persuasive pieces (see Types of Support). Jenny provided a mini-lesson to help her students explore one specific kind of support: the survey. After the class read and analyzed two survey-based articles, noting how the writers formulated survey questions and how they worded their findings, the students were asked to come up with a simple survey question on any topic (see Survey Form). Then they surveyed 13 of their classmates, wrote a statement summarizing the results, recorded one hard-hitting quote from another student, and then shared what they had written with their classmates.

Once the students identified ways to support their positions, they began to consider organization. Using the form Ways To Organize a Problem/Solution Piece, the students chose their "big ideas" and decided the order in which they would write about them. Once this structure was in place, they began developing specific support and providing transitions.

Throughout all these activities, Jenny repeatedly drew her students' attention to techniques editorial writers use in their introductions and conclusions. The students kept copies of Things a Writer Might Do in an Introduction and Possible Purposes of a Conclusion in their binders to refer to as they analyzed samples and worked on their drafts.

When the students had completed their drafts, they met with a peer partner chosen by their teacher. During the peer conferences, students completed an Editorial Scoring Guide for their partners and asked and answered questions about their papers.

After spending an additional week revising and polishing their work, the students submitted their papers to the teacher and wrote a reflection about their experiences with persuasive writing, focusing on what they had learned, what they had struggled with, and how they might improve (see Reflections and student reflection sample).