**PD Module on TASC Argumentative Essay**

**Goals:**

* Teachers will understand the demands of the TASC argumentative essay
* Teachers will know how to teach specialized vocabulary used in TASC essay prompts
* Teachers will understand common areas of difficulty for students in writing the TASC essay, such as pinpointing reasons and examples in source texts, paraphrasing, planning, organizing, and writing introductions and conclusions, and learn methods to address them

**Part One: Understanding the prompt**

Materials: Words and definitions from the TASC essay prompt written on index cards, attached.

Steps:

1. As teachers come in, each teacher receives a card with one of the challenging words from the prompt, and another teacher receives a card with the definition. Once the group is assembled, teachers must walk around looking for their mates—the word that matches their definition, or the definition that matches their word. Once they are together, they should discuss what their word has to do with the TASC essay.
2. The group comes together and each pair of teacher reports back while the facilitator takes notes on the report-back.

**Part Two: What are we Aiming for with the TASC Essay?**

Materials: Prompt for the TASC sample essay on free libraries; two accompanying texts

Steps:

1. Tell teachers that it’s important for them to clearly understand the demands of the TASC essay if they are going to prepare students for it. To this end, they are going to look at two anchor papers that have been scored by TASC scorers. Before they read the anchor papers, they will need to read the source texts. Hand out the source texts.
2. Tell teachers that it’s very helpful if the students think of their argumentative essays in terms of three main building blocks: *claims, reasons*, and *examples*. Ask teachers to read silently, and to underline these three things in each paper: claims, reasons, and examples. We will return to this later in the session.
3. Give out the anchor papers. Teachers should work in groups of two or three to read the anchor papers, decide which of the three is stronger, middle, least strong, and why. They should then make sure they can answer the discussion questions. Allow ten minutes or so for this part of the session and walk around as teachers are talking in groups to get a sense of what they are noticing.
4. Bring the group back together and ask for a report back. What did they notice? What were their points of agreement and disagreement? As the report back continues, use teacher observations to make a list on the board of the main criteria for the TASC essay:
* There is a claim
* It’s organized, and the reasons are elaborated with examples.
* Some information from the text is used, even if it is not quoted.
* There is a counterargument, however brief.
* There is an introduction and conclusion
1. If none of the teachers points it out, you may want to point out that the “2” essay is organized—it’s just that the ideas are not developed. It does have a brief counterargument and a rudimentary conclusion. Make sure teachers understand that the “2” essay has a passing score.

**Part Three: Getting Students Ready to Write**

Materials:

* Source texts on video games
1. Tell teachers that now they will walk through the essay-writing process as if they were students. This process has been classroom-tested and attempts to address the pitfalls that students tend to fall into when writing. Of course, there may be other pitfalls that need to be addressed.
2. Explain that one thing that makes the TASC essay difficult for students is that they need to incorporate their own voice with the “voice” of the source texts, and this often leads to copying out large sections of text. What is needed, however, is for students to think about the issue on their own before writing. Therefore, a short brainstorm is in order.
3. Write the question on the board. VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES LEAD TO VIOLENT BEHAVIOR IN REAL LIFE-DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE? Tell teachers to think about their position for one minute, then you will ask them to go to one side of the room or the other, depending on whether they agree or disagree.
4. Once teachers have assembled themselves, give them 3-5 minutes to come up with reasons to support their claim. Bring the group together and ask each group to say their reasons. Write these on the board under a ‘Agree” and “Disagree” column.

**Part Four: Reading the Source Texts**

Materials:

* Source texts on video games
1. Tell teachers that the next step is to read the texts. First, they will read Text 1, “Video Games Cause Real-Life Violence.”
2. Ask teachers to read silently, identifying claim, reasons and examples. When finished, they should turn to a partner and discuss which reason they found most compelling and think they might use. Ask them to reread the paragraph for that reason and highlight a line or section of text they think they might use in their essay.
3. For lower level students, it’s a good idea to do a think aloud about the first text so that they have a model. Project the text, or use a piece of flip chart paper in which you’ve written the first paragraph in large letters. Start the think aloud by saying that you will be looking for 1) claim 2) reasons 3) examples. Underline or write notes as you talk aloud about how you are recognizing claim, reason, and examples, and about difficult sections of the text and unknown words and how you are dealing with that.
4. Repeat the process with Text Two.

**Part Five: Planning and Paraphrasing**

Materials:

* Paraphrasing worksheet
1. Tell teachers that it’s very helpful for students to take a few moments to plan their essay. Mainly, they need to know which reasons they will be using and which parts of the text they will use as evidence. Model an extremely simple plan on the board:
* Claim: Playing violent video games does not necessarily lead to violent behavior
* Reason 1—Video games-social benefit
* Evidence from text: Experiments showed “prosocial behavior” – maybe because of multi-player cooperation in games
* Reason 2-Video games-work out feelings
* Evidence from text: study shows higher video game sales correlates with less crime
1. Ask teachers to do the same.
2. Tell teachers that one of the things students struggle with the most when writing the TASC essay is that they use too much of the text. Paraphrasing is a very important skill. It is also REALLY difficult for students to pick up and they need a lot of practice, as well as some language scaffolding. Ask teachers to choose a part of the text that they plan to use in their essay. As a group, brainstorm some of the language they would use to insert this information into an essay. Write the sentence starters/frames on the board as they are generated.

1. Ask teachers to take a few moments in pairs to paraphrase the section of text they will use in their essay, then discuss: what is involved in paraphrasing? Have they tried this with students? What do students struggle with? Look at some student examples. Say that this is a skill they should practice a lot with students separately in order to get them ready for the essay.

**Part Six: Using a Template to Write; Counterclaims**

Materials:

* Template
1. Tell teachers that a good way to help students stay organized is to have them write their body paragraphs first. Give out the template and have them look at it, then give out a few student paragraphs to show how the template helped.

1. Counter claims. Discuss what is difficult for students about counterclaims. As a group, generate more language that can be used to introduce and refute counterclaims. Have a volunteer come up and model how a student could insert a counterclaim after their two body paragraphs.

**Part Seven: Introductions and Conclusions**

Materials:

* Sample introductions sheet
* Sample conclusions sheet
1. Discuss introductions. Have teachers discuss: do your students struggle with introductions? What’s difficult for them? How do you help students write introductions? Introduce the idea that you want students who are just about able to write a TASC essay to have the option of a simple “meat and potatoes” introduction like the one in the template, and give more advanced students the option of writing more sophisticated introduction. Give out some of the student introductions and have teachers discuss in pairs.
2. Discuss conclusions. Give out the criteria for conclusions and the samples. Ask teachers to discuss: do these conclusions meet the criteria? How can these help students understand what they need to do when they write a conclusion?