



## Writing Prompts

### Keeping Track

Before beginning a prompt, prepare a spreadsheet with the following headings:

- Grade
- Content
- Standard
- Genre
- Prompt title
- Prompt
- Stimulus material (You will need several columns for this.)

This spreadsheet will allow you to see all prompts in one place. It also allows you to easily track stimulus materials and change them if the websites' URLs change or break. Using a spreadsheet to organize prompts and then copy and paste the prompt title, prompt, and stimulus materials into the writing website also helps avoid errors.

### Creating the Prompt

- All prompt writing begins with the content standards. You need to first decide what standard(s) you wish the prompt to address.
- The next step is to decide the prompt's genre (argumentative/opinion, informative/explanatory, or narrative).
- When you choose one of these genres, you are automatically using standard 1, 2, or 3 of the Common Core English Language Arts Writing Standards (= Utah Core, NC Common Core, TEKS, etc.).
- The next step is to create a rough draft of the prompt. The most difficult part of writing prompts is to ensure that they are robust enough to elicit full-length essays. Use the prepackaged prompts on the writing site as models.
- Your prompt does not need to be finalized at this point. You just want an idea of your goal. The stimulus material you use will help you refine the prompt.
- Sometimes, you may begin with the stimulus material and then build the prompt from there. Just remember to always align the prompt to your standards.
- You may wish to create a prompt that satisfies standards in more than one content area. For example, you might create a prompt that meets one or more science standards as well as both reading and writing standards in English Language Arts. By adding both teachers to the same course, both can give feedback to students.

- Prompt content needs to tell students exactly what to do. Inclusion of information from the standards is helpful (“remember to address and refute the counterclaim”). Remember that students need prompts that are on their readability level!

### Finding Stimulus

- The kinds of stimulus materials available are unlimited. You can use websites, pdfs, graphics, videos, and/or audio recordings, class texts, handouts, and so on. Be creative. Teachers have a wealth of resources that are free to them but not to companies.
- Stimulus materials are difficult to find on websites for students in elementary and middle school, because even the sites that are developed for kids are usually written at about an eighth grade level.
- One challenge in finding articles on the web for high school students is that the ones that fit the standards are often written on a college level or above. Sometimes, websites developed for kids are helpful here, because they give the details needed without the high-level vocabulary and complexity.
- The great thing about public domain materials is that it can be copied and pasted into a Word document. This means it can be excerpted, a huge advantaged. Make sure to give credit to the source, however. Gutenberg.org and Authorama.com are just two suggestions. All government website content, including historical documents, are also public domain.
- If you are writing a prompt as a part of a unit of study in your classroom, you can ask students to use their notes/what they learned/materials from the unit as a part of the stimulus. However, if you are writing a stand-alone prompt that requires background knowledge that students have not necessarily learned in the classroom, you must ensure that everything they need to know is in the stimulus materials.

### Finding the Reading Level of Stimulus Material

- **Flesch Kincaid:**
  - *PC:* Copy and paste the URL into the box at <http://read-able.com/>. If you are using a source like Gutenberg (public domain), copy and paste the text you want into a Word document. Go to *File, Options, Proofing*. Check the box beside “Show Readability Statistics.” Hit *Save*. When you run a spell check, the grade level (readability) will automatically pop up when the spell check is finished. It will do this for every document from now on unless you uncheck the box.
  - *Mac:* Copy and paste the URL into the box at <http://read-able.com/>. If you are using a source like Gutenberg (public domain), copy and paste the text you want into a Pages document. Save the doc as Plain Text. Copy and paste it into the text box at the website above. We want the Flesch-Kincaid level.
- **Lexile:** Go to <https://www.lexile.com/analyzer/>. Sign up for a free account and follow the directions. This is a little more involved, but worth it, especially on an occasional basis.