

Writing With R.A.F.T.S.

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WHAT ARE R.A.F.T.S.?

Every Write-On page in each lesson, K–5, suggests a writing activity. The technique we chose to follow is an engaging way to help students learn how to narrow topics so they are manageable and to organize their ideas so they fit the purpose for the writing. R.A.F.T.S. are just what’s needed to write with focus, clarity, and energy on any subject. They are flexible, creative, and allow students to show what they really know about the topic, and you may find yourself using them for writing prompts outside of Modes in Focus.

HOW DO THEY WORK?

The R.A.F.T.S. strategy, a classroom-tested technique for creating focused writing prompts, was first shared by Nancy Vandeventer, a talented teacher from Bozeman, Montana, back in the 1970s. Her idea was to give students baseline information to focus their writing by identifying a specific Role, Audience, Format, Topic, and Strong Verb. Structured but not rigid, this format gives students plenty of mental elbow room to write interesting, informative text, regardless of its purpose.

The construction of a R.A.F.T.S. prompt is simple:

- First, identify each of the components of the prompt. For example, if your students have been studying endangered animals and the impact that human encroachment is having on their environments, the components might look like this in the opinion mode:

Role: endangered flying squirrel

Audience: construction company president, Ms. _____

Format: email

Topic: find someplace else to build and leave your forest alone

Strong Verb: *persuade*

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- Next, write the prompt in paragraph form. Since establishing a role for the writer is the first step, most R.A.F.T.S. start with “You are....”

You are an endangered flying squirrel living in a forest that is about to be leveled for a shopping center. Write an email to the construction company president, persuading her to find someplace else to build and leave your forest alone.

- Last, introduce the R.A.F.T.S. prompt to students by identifying the purpose for each component in the prompt and providing enough time for students to create successful writing pieces.

A fifth-grader’s writing, based on the R.A.F.T.S. Prompt

Dear Construction Company President,

I am an endangered flying squirrel and part of a very large family currently living in the Southwest Forest. This is the same Southwest Forest that your company plans to clear to build a shopping center.

Shopping centers may be good for humans, but they aren’t so good for endangered flying squirrels. Generations of flying squirrels have called this forest home for hundreds of years. If you clear our trees, where will we go? How will we find food? We will surely die out. I am wondering, is this shopping center worth the extinction of our species?

In order to have a part in protecting our species, maybe you could put your shopping center someplace else. You might want to think about that old vacant lot next to the game arcade. Don’t you think that parents would love to shop while their children are playing games?

My family and I hope you will do the right thing to save our species, and allow us to live in our forest forever.

Sincerely,
Rocky

R.A.F.T.S. give students just the right amount of structure, coupled with permission to be creative—a great combination for writing success!

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R.A.F.T.S. AND THE WRITING MODES

It takes lots of practice for students to become proficient in the modes of writing: narrative, informational, and opinion. The Write-On page features R.A.F.T.S. to help students understand whether the purpose of writing is to tell a story, to explain, or to provide an opinion. Notice how the R.A.F.T.S. prompts below deal with the same topic, but in three different modes.



NARRATIVE

Role: endangered flying squirrel father

Audience: drey of young squirrels

Format: story

Topic: your life in the forest

Strong Verb: tell

R.A.F.T.S. Prompt in paragraph form:

Imagine you are an endangered flying squirrel and the father of a drey of young squirrels. Write a story to tell your children about your life in the forest and all the excitement and danger you've experienced there—including man's encroaching building and construction.



INFORMATIONAL

Role: writer

Audience: readers

Format: notes on cards

Topic: where flying squirrels live, what they eat, how many are left in the world, their natural and not-so-natural enemies, and why they are an important species to have in the world

Strong Verb: detail

R.A.F.T.S. Prompt in paragraph form:

You are a writer responsible for gathering background research on an article called "Animals and Their Homes: Saving Habitats for Endangered Species" for the readers of an animal magazine. Create the notes on cards with information that will be in this article, detailing where flying squirrels live, what they eat, how many are left in the world, their natural and not-so-natural enemies, and why they are an important species to have in the world.



OPINION

Role: head of the Endangered Animals committee

Audience: shopping center owner

Format: flyer

Topic: encourage townspeople to attend a meeting

Strong Verb: encourage

R.A.F.T.S. Prompt in paragraph form:

You are the head of the Endangered Animals committee, who just found out that a forest is being cleared in order to build a new shopping center. Create a flyer encouraging local townspeople to come to a public meeting where you can help choose another location. Your goal is to save the flying squirrel population, who are endangered and only live in this one place. Be sure to include several good arguments that will persuade local townspeople to attend for the sake of this worthy cause.

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After using R.A.F.T.S. with students for a while, we're sure you'll agree that they give students a much-wanted framework to get started writing, while still being flexible and creative. You'll likely not hear those seven deadly words: "I don't know what to write about!" Of course, you want students to write on topics of their own choosing, too, but when you teach them the format and structure of R.A.F.T.S., they can use them to plan original ideas with ease.

R.A.F.T.S. do not take the place of longer, meatier mode projects. The R.A.F.T.S. in Modes in Focus are meant to be short practice pieces to gain skills in modes. You will want to have students working on more extensive writing projects as well. There is more on this subject in Chapters 5 and 6 in *Teach Writing Well*.