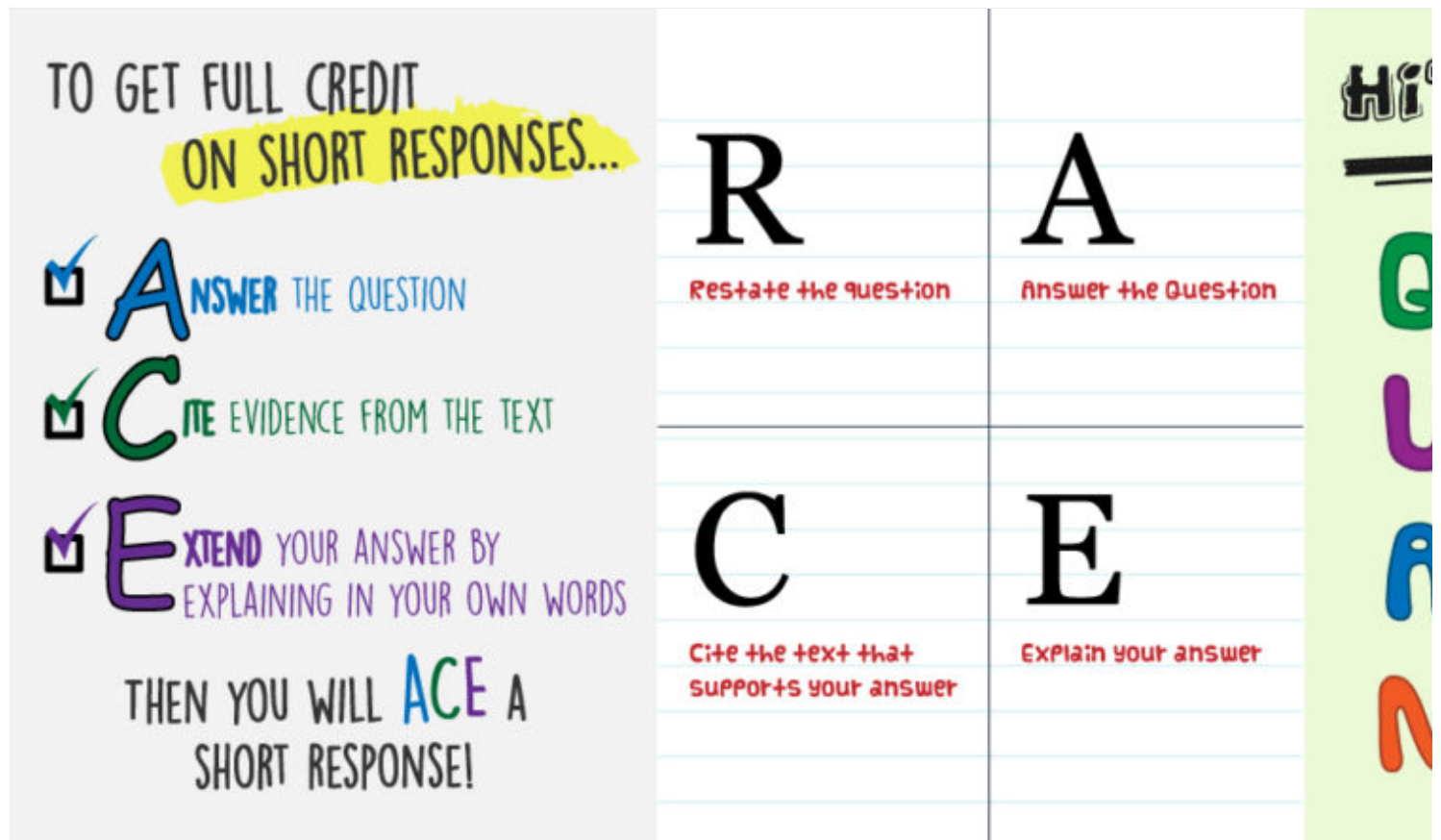


The Hard Work Before the Pencil Hits the Paper: Writing About Reading

By Sarah Catto | Categories: Writing

Take a look at the three images below. What do they all have in common?



Answer? They are all examples of common acronyms that are used by teachers to teach students about writing. Let's look into them a bit more deeply by considering another question: What is missing from these acronyms when it comes to writing about reading or responding to a text-dependent analysis (TDA)?

Note that each one includes the letter A for "Answer the question." When it comes to writing about reading, this part of each acronym requires the most analyzing, inferring, and higher-order thinking before the student can move on through the rest of the acronym. TDA questions require analytical reading before the student places those thoughts in writing. In order for the writing to fully answer the question, we have to place emphasis on reading skills and writing skills.

The world of writing in our classrooms, and now in state assessments across the country, is changing. Even just a few years ago, teachers were instructing students in the ways of prompt-based writing. Armed with sample prompts and exemplars, we showed

students how to successfully write in response to a prompt.

Now, however, students are being asked to not just write to a prompt, but to also complete text-dependent analyses of passages and write about what they have read. And teachers must figure out how to best support students in both types of writing. The skills needed when writing about reading and writing in response to a prompt are different; let's make the distinction clear.

When writing about reading, students need both sufficient reading and writing skills. For example, TDA items might ask students to write an essay describing how one character in a story changes because of the actions of another character. This requires **analyzing** characters as they develop and interact within a particular context. Analyzing characters requires thoughtful attention and discussion of what the reader notices about each character's traits and actions within the passage, and how the characters impact each other. Students have to be able to dig into the text to find both implicit and explicit development of the characters and infer and explain the relationship between them: so much reading work before the pencil ever hits the paper!

In an example of a writing task, grade 4 students asked to write an essay analyzing how the author's organization of a simple informational passage on hiking helps the reader understand the tasks involved with this outdoor activity. This task again focuses on a reading skill before the student ever begins writing. The student must be able to **interpret and analyze** the author's use of words, phrases, text features, conventions, and structures, and how their relationships shape meaning in the text. That's a whole lot of heavy lifting for a young reader, who then has to translate that heavy lifting into a well-written piece that cites evidence from the passage to support their thinking!

Meanwhile, writing to a prompt is a very different task for students. Some examples of prompts are:

- When is a time you felt gratitude in your life?
- When is a time you did the right thing even though you didn't feel like doing it?
- Describe a routine that you often or always do (in the morning, when you get home, Friday nights, before a game, etc.)

While writing to a prompt might require organization of thoughts around the question, citing specific examples and explaining how they support the overall answer, it does not require skillful analysis of text. The questions students have to answer do not require the same amount of thinking as a deep analysis of a text.

Let's match our instruction to the assessment and help students think more deeply about analyzing what they have read and writing a thoughtful essay. Writing about reading and TDA assessments require students to utilize close-reading strategies and to draft a coherent written response. The next blog in this series on writing about reading will focus on what those tasks look like in classroom settings. We'll try to answer the question, "What kinds of instructional strategies can we use to meet the needs of students who are analyzing texts and writing about reading?"