

Finding Topics You Care About

WARMUP CONNECTION

Make a list, freewrite in your daybook, or pair share: What bugs you?

TEACHING CONNECTION

Ask students to share some of the things that bug them. Ask them whether what they named is something they would fight for to get changed. Who would they write to or what would they do to change what bugs them?

If you can show this YouTube video in your school, it will make a stunning impact. (5 minutes)

http://media.causes.com/510213?p_id=41819320

Titled “The Girl Who Silenced the World,” viewers watch as Severn Cullis-Suzuki from Vancouver, Toronto addresses the UN's Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. At 9 years old, she founded the Environmental Children's Organization (ECO), a small group of children committed to learning and teaching other kids about environmental issues. They were successful in many projects before 1992 and then raised enough money to go to the UN's Earth Summit. Their aim was to remind the decision-makers of who their actions or inactions would ultimately affect. Their goal was reached when 12-year old Severn closed a Plenary Session with her powerful speech that received a standing ovation.

TEACHING POINT

Before students meet with the types of testing situations being considered here—classroom tests designed by teachers, district tests, and statewide writing tests—it is important that they've received many weeks and months of ongoing, rigorous writing instruction.

---Janet Angellino, Heinemann, *Writing to the Prompt: When Students Don't Have a Choice*, 2005.

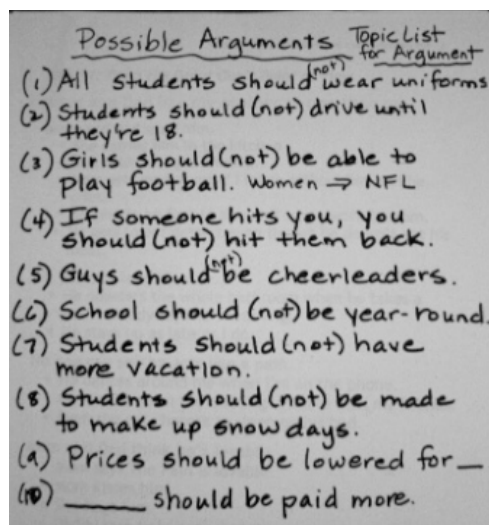
I say something like, In order to write about topics you don't know much about, you need to practice by writing about topics you do know about. That's why during this writing unit I'd like you to play with writing about ideas that are important to you. **What you care about is likely to be more important than any test prompt.**

Practicing on topics you know will help you understand the form and function of this kind of writing and tests (or writing to your boss someday) will be a breeze. Writing persuasively is the kind of writing that gets things done. Part of this unit will be about seeing **what you do and don't like** about the world and writing about it to let people know.

TEACHING

Make a list of the topics students thought about during this writing workshop. If the students have a hard time getting started, I tell them about topics that I know are going to change their world. For example, there are congressman and woman who think students should not drive until they're 18. How do they feel about that? I add, “Students should (not) be allowed to drive at 16 years of age.” *I always record the claim in the positive and the negative so students feel comfortable arguing either way.* I add...

1. Girls should (not) be able to pay in the NFL. That usually gets the class pretty riled up.
2. School should (not) be year round.
3. School days should (not) be lengthened.
4. School make-up snow days should (not) be mandatory.



Part of a brainstormed list recorded on an overhead transparency.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

At this point students are ready to work on their own or with partners to generate more topics. The tone of the classroom is pretty loud at this point. I challenge them to think globally like Severn Cullis-Suzuki from Vancouver. What issues concern them and what audiences should they address?

CLOSURE

Ask students to add to the class chart so others can see a more complete brainstormed list.

LINK

Students should continue to record the topics they care about on their topic page. They will access this page throughout the unit. I will not ask students to write on the same topic. They will write and research ideas they care about. (See chart students generated in one class period.)

REFLECTION

1. What is the most important idea you'd like to write about? Write your idea on an exit cards (index card or half-sheet of paper).
2. Collect them. Assess to see who has found a topic and who needs some more coaching.
3. Hand back exit cards at the beginning of a class tomorrow. Greet students as they come in the door and connect with them over their chosen topic – comment on what they chose, recommend a book or article they might like to read, tell them about others in the classroom they might like to hook up with because they've taken up the same cause, etc.