Speaker 1: Graphic Organizer. We use the same graphic organizer all year, it just changes a little bit each time we add a piece. They have an overall one that we designed together that just has their essential question at the top, the answer, the claim, and then it breaks down their pieces of evidence and how we want that argument.

It includes, here is where you are going to put your lead in, here's your transition. We saw a lot of weakness in basic mechanics of writing. The graphic organizer we used last year did not include those things and we had to sit down and reimagine what is was that we wanted out of our students. That one's been really helpful and the fact the it's consistent, that we use it every single time we do argumentative writing, is extremely important.

You can get a lot of graphic organizers from other people but this one we designed ourselves because we found that we work better with it because it's our own piece. We can explain it to the kids because we went through the whole process of talking about it, I mean I can't even ...

Speaker 2: We have more investment in it.

Speaker 1: It's probably a ridiculous amount of time that we talk about one piece of paper, but it's been really helpful. Then they have another graphic organizer for every section. To just make their writing more detailed and better. One for the introduction. One for the conclusion. As many resources as we can give them as possible makes our individual work, when we do days like this, easier because if a kid asks you a question that can be answered by one of those resources you can just refer them to that as opposed to having the answer the same question fifteen times.

Speaker 2: Well, the nice part is once you build that into your routine, into your system, you guys didn't see us use the graphic organizers: the introduction, counter argument, body paragraph, conclusion. You guys didn't see that because we've already used that in three other essays [00:02:00] prior, so the kids either knew the structure and didn't need it, or had it glued into their notebook and could go reference it themselves. At this point, the goal at this point, fourth quarter, is to have it as self-directed as possible and self-managing as possible. That's, I think, pretty much what we have and why we didn't have a lot of questions when it came to structure. The only questions we ever had all day long was, "how do I apply this content to this structure that we already have?"

I think we've given them the skills, given them materials, and they understand the materials and the rest is just kind of what we would expect no matter what subject we taught.

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Speaker 2: How do I just plug this content in to this thought process and use it.

Speaker 1:   I mean, today they were using absolutely everything we've talked about. For the last three weeks, in this unit, we have all of the text out that they've used and have told them throughout the whole unit, "you're going to be using this in your essay. It's really important that you remember where you got your information from." They've become a lot more independent. We could just leave it in the center of the classroom and they're seeking out the resources they need and getting it. As much text as possible, always and a lot of organizational skills. They might not remember anything about the civil war after they're with us, but if we can give them skills. The skills that they're going to use to write and the skills they need for organization. That's what our planning is always directed at. History is a fun topic, and the kids do get engaged in a lot of it, but the more hard concrete skills that we can give them. That's where we're always aiming at when we develop our materials.

Speaker 2:   That is the one nice thing about Common Core. Like the Common Core standards? They're centered around skill based development.

Speaker 1:   Yeah.

Speaker 2:   That's one thing I do like about it. It does give you a very concrete jumping point when planning your units, planning your lessons.

Speaker 1:   The agenda is always up on the board. As many angles as you can get it. Visual, auditory. We have kids who have processing disorders [00:04:00] and you can sit there and talk to them, and they just don't hear you. They're not going to get it unless they see it in writing. They're not going to get it unless they see it in a picture. So, everything that we talk about is always up on the Smart Board. Every single time. They know that and it's become part of their routine. They're always checking it out before they ask us questions.

               The general agenda is always up on the Smart Board when they come in. Their routine is come in, do bell work that's up on the smart board, they don't have to ask any questions, gives us a couple minutes to gather our thoughts before we jump in with the students, and makes them as independent as possible.

Speaker 2:   [inaudible 00:04:35] Well the nice part about something like that, too, it eliminates questions. As a teacher, as you develop and become more mature in your profession all you're trying to do is streamline what you're doing and make yourself as effective as possible in the time that you're here. Eliminates the questions that get repeated all day. Something as simple as you talked about, the agenda, what's for homework, what are we doing today? If you can knock out those questions, you're saving yourself three to five minutes at the beginning where you can do something else to gear up for the lesson. Just try to make yourself as effective as possible. I guess in the end, that's really what all our graphic organizers, all our routines, and all of that is for.

Speaker 1:   We've been working on them for a really long time and I think we're pretty confident with using them now. We've seen the students ... we've been using the same particular graphic organizer for awhile and we've talked about it, like I said, for a long time, and it's

always evolving and I don't think we'd ever be opposed to making a change to something if we saw it as working better.

Speaker 2:   I think the only thing I would add, is maybe like a prethink to this graphic organizer ... prethink the prethink, gosh. That's ridiculous. Really, if we could have them break down their argument. Picking one of the sides and developing that side before they dive into their argument and start organizing their ideas, maybe [00:06:00] that would just help them be more confident in whatever their claim is, or whatever their evidence is going to be. You know what I mean?

Speaker 1:   So, just adding in an extra step?

Speaker 2:   Just a little piece right before.

Speaker 1:   Okay.

Speaker 2:   Maybe a T-chart or something like that. Pulling out the evidence for both sides so they could ... their nothing fancy, but ... organize thoughts.

Speaker 1:   We've ... I've received a lot of help. Our transitions worksheet, and our introduction graphic organizer, and conclusion graphic organizer. We've talked to multiple Language Arts teachers and gotten lots of help from them. We put cute little clip art on it to make it more engaging for the kids and it works well. We've done well with it.

Speaker 2:   I think all the materials that we use, whether it's the content materials or the graphic organizers, it just always goes back to "what are we giving these kids to walk away with?" Hopefully it's the skills, hopefully it's the thought process. Or even a willingness to go out and find information yourself and that was something we kind of dove into a little bit yesterday with students. Talk about comma usage and how they know that they're not confident in their comma usage an that they make mistakes. I was telling a personal story myself, I had to go on the internet. First four hits on Google have some really useful "here's how to properly use a comma." Even something like that, just so that ... meeting the Common Core standard, being a self directed learner. Even something like that.

Hopefully, we're giving them the skills and the desire to just be ... I don't know ... a well thought person. Just a solid human being. A kind of individual who thinks for themselves and develops an opinion. That's what we're trying to do as teachers, right? Create the best human being possible. Hopefully, in all of this as a whole that's what we're trying to get to.

Speaker 1:   I think they have recognized at this point. You hear, "Oh, I really didn't want to do this before, but now [00:08:00] I understand why you make us do it. I got to my final draft and it was the best essay I've written. I didn't think that I needed it, but I actually did." We hear that a lot from our students, and that's why we try to integrate ... like I said, you'll read a million IEPs that say "use of graphic organizers for writing assignments" or "chunk information" or "repeat directions." As much of that as we build in as possible,

even our high level kids are saying, "Oh! I never thought about seeking out different language to use for my transitions and my lead ins until you gave me this handout that showed me all the different ones that I can use."

Or, "I realize now that I'm going to put in a lot of up front work, but it was worth it because it only took me twenty minutes to finally type up my essay because I'd done all the hard work up front." It's pretty cool at this stage of the year to see them making that realization because we have say it to them as many times as we want, and probably more times than they want to hear it from us, but by this stage in the year we're hearing that connection. That's pretty cool. Them saying, "Oh, I get why you did this. It makes sense. Now, I am more organized, my ideas make more sense."

Speaker 2:   It's amazing how universal this stuff is, too.

Speaker 1:   Yeah.

Speaker 2:   You kind of hit it, when you use the graphic organizer your using all these good practice things. It's effective all the way from your highest level learner to your ELL students, or English Language Learner students. We were working with Ms. Dejean, our ELL teacher and she was going through and I was basically asking her for advice. What can I modify to make this as effective as possible? She gave me a few tweaks, and we added them in really easily. It's really cool, even the kids who find it easy, find it useful and it gets them to their final product that much faster and with that much more confidence. It brings along and carries along the lower level students and I think it gives them the confidence, "Hey, I'm working right aside this kid I know is pulling straight A's." [00:10:00] It's just amazing to me how just universal all these things are for students. I never would have thought.

It actually makes my life easier. I think that's the nicest part. It's not only just effective for them, but makes my teaching that much easier and effective.

Speaker 1:   Their final products better, makes our grading easier.

Speaker 2:   Yeah, and I'm all for that.

Speaker 1:   Oh yeah.

Speaker 2:   Whatever makes grading easier.