

Report from the Field

Shaping Informed Contributors to Participatory Culture: Research-Based Writing Across the Curriculum in an American International School in China

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In an era of mass-marketed misinformation, research-based writing across the curriculum (WAC) is needed in secondary education. High school students are able not just to access information easily online but to contribute to what is known as participatory culture: the culture of actively engaging via online platforms. Students can make contributions that are meaningful by learning how to research information in a variety of academic subject areas through the use of critical thinking—the ability to evaluate an issue and form a judgement about it—and then being able to communicate that research. Teaching students how to identify credible sources of information and how to avoid plagiarism, as they apply their research to real-world issues, will prepare them to engage in participatory culture with knowledge and integrity, mitigating the spread of misinformation through online platforms.

This report describes a grade-12 interdisciplinary project in which students partook in environmental research through the lens of rhetoric (AP Language and Composition), statistics (AP Statistics), environmental studies (AP Environmental Science), and politics (Accelerated Comparative Government and Politics). The project included an imaginary political scenario, in which students roleplayed as fictional candidates, from various points along the American political spectrum, campaigning on social media and debating, with the goal of being elected Head of the Environmental Protection Agency.

This project was undertaken by students at an American international school in Ningbo, China and may be applicable in various ways to courses in Western secondary institutions, especially given that participatory culture is a global phenomenon. The school consists primarily of Chinese students who have an interest in attending Western high schools and/or universities but also includes the children of expatriates from Canada, Brazil, America, Korea, Sudan, and Sweden. The school has an English First policy that requires students to speak English (unless a translation is absolutely needed) and to possess a certain level of English proficiency in order to attend literature and composition courses. Students without the required level of proficiency take an English Language Learner (ELL) course as an elective. The school uses AERO (American Education Reaches Out) standards, also known as Common Core Plus standards, and offers Advanced Placement courses audited through the College Board.

WAC Beyond the High School Classroom

When the Common Core State Standards were introduced in America in 2014, they required that the “burden of literacy” shift to all content areas, but as Dalporto (2013) explained, writing is not just for academia:

Learning to write, and write well, is a crucial life skill. Not only does it help one succeed in school, it's vital to success in the "real" world too. Writing has become essential in today's wired world. We communicate through the written word on a daily basis via email and text. (Why Write Across the Curriculum? section, para. 1)

Hanstedt (2012) reiterated the importance of WAC to education reform as well as the world beyond the classroom:

if students are to learn, if they are to acquire the skills they'll need to succeed in a complex world, all of us will have to share the responsibility for teaching them key content and skills—not just once, but multiple times and increasing levels of complexity (p. 49).

Research is an important component of WAC because students need to be able to learn and apply knowledge from various disciplines. Michelle Sidler (2005) explained that WAC pedagogy encourages students to invest in their own research, enabling them to become "citizen experts" and thus informed members of society. She wrote, "WAC pedagogies can encourage students to own their research, to claim personal responsibility by guiding academic discourse through civic involvement" (p. 50). By researching in various subjects that interest them, students can move new knowledge from academic discourse to family life and social relations. Sidler approached the research paper "as a hybrid of several contexts and tasks [that introduces] students to both WAC-oriented writing-to-learn strategies and rhetorically-informed critical heuristics" (p. 51). Sidler explained that this approach builds on the classical rhetorical principles of being knowledgeable and able to speak on various topics without specializing in a particular field of study. She continued, "A well-rounded education fosters the cognitive skills needed to understand challenging specialized content, but the communicative reflection of interdisciplinary, foundational studies is also imperative" (52). Being well-rounded in this way allows students to be informed citizens engaging in participatory culture.

WAC in China and Plagiarism Concerns

Townsend and Zawacki (2013) explored China's growing interest in WAC/WID, but also its reticence: "We surmise that Chinese teachers' reluctance to embrace writing-to-learn pedagogies is closely tied to well-established testing culture that dominates all levels of education" (p. 103). They described how Chinese students felt disoriented in an American university, where they were expected to write analytical essays, with multiple revisions, after coming from a Chinese education, which mainly practices memorization in preparation for the *gaokao*, or end-of-school exam. Townsend and Zawacki suggested that WAC pedagogies at the secondary level would help to lessen confusion among international students who transition to Western universities.

This cultural disparity in education creates a potential for plagiarism in an international or Western setting. Bikowski and Gui (2018) suggested that there are different values placed on learning in different countries,

for example the prioritization of synthesis and critical thinking in Western cultures vs. memorization of content in non-Western cultures Similarly, weaving unattributed source words with personal voice as an “imitation” was seen as useful for learning in participants in China . . . but considered plagiarism in the West (p. 195).

Chou (2010) also explained that “cultural differences play an essential role in the conception of plagiarism” (p. 40) and recommended that plagiarism be taught explicitly so that Chinese students understand its potential consequences in a Western school or institution. However, Liu (2005) argued that Chinese students are unfairly accused of plagiarism and that the culture explicitly teaches students not to steal other people’s ideas: “I received all of my education, with the exception of my graduate study, in China, and I never recall any of my teachers telling us it was acceptable to copy others’ writing and turn it in as one’s own” (p. 3). Liu added that the Chinese have two terms for plagiarism, “piao qie” and “cao xi” (with the second one meaning “to secretly attack someone from behind”), which date back to 700 AD. But Liu conceded that

the fact that plagiarism has always been criticized in China does not mean that plagiarism has not been a problem there. In fact, it has been and still is, perhaps more so today than before because of the negative impact of economic reform on education and the publishing industry and because the lack of clear laws for punishing plagiarism as well as the ineffective enforcement of existing laws thanks to the fact that China has never been truly a country governed by law (p. 236).

Liu suggested that developing language and writing skills will help students to avoid plagiarism.

Social Media, Participatory Culture, and Project-Based Learning

What is learned in the classroom should also be applicable outside of the classroom. Zheng et al. (2018) explained that

what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century is being reshaped to include not only traditional literacies, that is, reading and writing in print-based environments, but also the knowledge, skills, and strategies needed for comprehending and communicating via new technologies (p. 1).

Social media allows for collaborative communication, which can also be beneficial for ELL students. Zheng et al. wrote that “writing via social media can provide opportunities for English learners to communicate with native English speakers and practice their written language in authentic and motivating ways” (p. 1). Writing through new technologies can prepare students for participatory culture, which Jenkins et al. (2009) described as

a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informed mentorship whereby what is known by the most

experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another. (p. 3)

The expanding media landscape, which has created a space for participatory culture, opens up opportunities for students to involve themselves in global issues and engage with people all over the world. Bloom and Johnston (2010) explained that “new technologies and the emergence of Web 2.0 participatory culture have created a globally integrated virtual environment in which people conduct business, engage in social relationships, undertake various types of research and so on” (p. 113). Referencing Jenkins et al.’s (2009) observation that participatory culture shifts the focus from “individual expression” to “community involvement,” allowing for cross-cultural exchange and understanding, Bloom and Johnston noted, “The role of the educator, as a result of these new media, has changed substantially from one that is focused on the one-way transfer of information to one that trains students how to participate in this new environment with intelligence, skill, and literacy” (p. 113).

A pedagogical strategy consistent with this changed role of the educator is Project-Based Learning (PBL). Project-Based Learning helps students address real-life problems in an educational setting, often for a public audience. Condliffe (2017) explained, “What clearly distinguishes PBL from other instructional approaches is that projects are not the culmination of learning (as they often are in standard classrooms), but instead are the process through which learning takes place” (p. 11). J. Lamar and Mergendoller (2010) explained further that PBL

is intended to teach significant content . . . requires critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and various forms of communication . . . requires inquiry as part of the process of learning and creating something new . . . is organized around an open-ended Driving Question . . . creates a need-to-know essential content and skills . . . allows some degree of student voice and choice . . . includes process for revision and reflection . . . involves a public audience (p. 3).

Lamar and Mergendoller pointed out that PBL can be reinforced if it is practiced across multiple classes and subjects.

Research-Based Writing Across the Curriculum Project

For this research-based WAC project, I asked participating teachers to first conduct a mini research project (see Appendix) in their respective subject areas. I gave teachers a framework for the research process, including step-by-step procedures, and *They Say/I Say*, by Gerald Graff, Cathy Birkstein, and Cyndee Maxwell, to provide students with sentence stems for the writing process. Teachers were encouraged to add elements to the project that fit research and writing in their particular disciplines (e.g., citation format, with MLA serving as a default). Students were instructed to find three sources (two texts and one image/video) that addressed an essential question in their core courses and explain why those sources were credible. The teacher then went over what makes a source credible, and students were given a credibility checklist (see Appendix) to evaluate their sources. Once their sources were double-checked by the teacher, the students completed an annotated bibliography in

which they summarized their sources and explained their connection to the essential question, using the sentence stems provided. The teachers then reviewed the source citations and works cited/bibliographic information for their subject area before students chose one subject on which to write their research papers in my AP Language and Composition course. Students created their projects on Microsoft SharePoint. They then commented on two of the other projects, using the *They Say/I Say* framework, and responded to any comments on their own projects. This mini project was completed at the end of October 2020.

In November, after the mini research project, students and teachers embarked on the interdisciplinary environmental research project. Students first learned about digital literacy and in this context reflected on their online discussions, conducted as part of their mini research projects, as contributions to participatory culture that affect themselves and the world. They were then each given a position on climate change from the American political spectrum (Tea Party, Green Party, Libertarian, etc.). Each student created a fictional persona based on their political position and began campaigning on climate change, researching three to five sources (including images and videos) that supported their arguments. Students campaigned on a social media platform (Microsoft SharePoint) where other students viewed their campaign slogans and promises and then voted for a candidate. The three candidates who received the most votes in this primary election moved on to the final debate. The students who were eliminated were organized into three teams, which were each assigned to one of the top candidates, and prepared for the final debate by conducting research to promote their candidate's position on climate change.

Following the final debate, students were given a quiz to test their knowledge of source credibility and appropriate evidence. The quiz depicted three real-world scenarios that students were asked to respond to in an argumentative paragraph, using textual evidence and proper citation. The aim of the quiz was to determine whether students could find credible sources in order to avoid misinformation and make informed contributions to a larger discussion.

After each of these stages—the mini research project, the interdisciplinary debate, and the source credibility quiz—teachers and students were surveyed about the project.

SURVEY RESULTS

Mini Research Project and Student/Teacher Interviews

After the mini research project, and before moving on to the interdisciplinary project, the teachers were surveyed about which materials they found to be most useful.

AP Environmental Science teacher Habib Ulhaq:

The [Mini Research Project Handout] was the most useful resource. It scaffolded the entire project very well. Since I was able to give the whole thing to the students, it allowed them to work at their own pace rather than me dictating when they could move on. I learned more about their personal habits when it comes to more intensive research-based assignments.

Comparative Government and Politics teacher Zachary Gerhard:

The Mini Research Project Handout and [its] PowerPoint presentation were both helpful as they laid out what the aims of the project were in a way that was easily communicated to my students. The credibility checklist, specifically, made understanding what is an acceptable or scholarly source easy for students to understand. In working through the checklist, it became apparent that many students thought that they had a solid foundation in research but brought their understanding to the next level when they actually worked through the checklist with multiple sources and source types.

AP Statistics teacher Rafael Rawls:

I thought that both the PowerPoint and the Mini Research Project Handout were very useful. Students told me specifically that the KWL chart [see Appendix] helped out a great deal with their research. The graphic organizers also gave me a great guide for how the students should organize their work and makes it easier to check/grade.

Teachers were also asked about what other resources should be included in the mini research project.

Gerhard:

I think that the hardest thing for our students to understand when it comes to research is that the best information does not come from typing the essential question into Google and looking at the top three links. A practical/walkthrough-type assignment that shows the natural progression of turning a question into a search term and what the actual finding of information looks like would be something that would help them a lot. A side-by-side comparison of a completed annotated bibliography and completed essay using the same resources would also be valuable in showing them how one informs the other.

This sentiment was echoed by the students. When asked what confused them about the process, one student responded, "I am not as much confused as I still find it kind of difficult to find sources and compile the relevant information in a clear and comprehensive manner." Another student said, "Finding credible sources and related to a topic confuses me because I think it's impossible to find them in a week if we have other many assignments to do." This information led to two lessons on research strategies and credible online resources, using materials from Teachers Pay Teachers.

Interdisciplinary Debate and Student/Teacher Interviews

After the interdisciplinary debate, the teachers were surveyed about the debate and the project overall. They were first asked what made the project successful.

Gerhard:

Students gained real-world experience with the skills taught in their core classes and were able to incorporate lessons learned in a high-stakes environment but still came away describing the experience as fun and enriching. Students were also forced to be independent and take full responsibility for their performance, and the transparency of process and information helped students to gauge where they were in relation to others in a constructive way. Lastly, cooperation between students was high and the support that I saw in classes was productive.

Ulhaq:

Student expectation was generally very clear. The writing assessments really helped develop their knowledge and uncover major gaps in understanding or effort.

Teachers were then asked what could have been done differently.

Gerhard:

I think that next year we should put more consideration into the process from primary elections to end process; while it may have been due to the size of this year's class, I wonder if assigning the individuals who didn't win the primary to another student's team was the best way to handle the situation. Some students felt like their work was either meaningless up to that point or that their participation from then on was minimal. While this is a matter of perspective, going forward it is something to think about. I wonder if assigning students to parties would have benefited them more, or if they would have been more enthusiastic or appropriately engaged if they had been made to participate as candidates on the day of. Many students also addressed the fact that they did not feel that this was a true "debate" as they had no chance to speak to one another directly, but rather spoke directly to the moderators. I think that while we would have to be careful about how students express themselves to one another, it might add to the experience. On a different note, preparation of the lower grades/audience to the topic beforehand would have helped with audience engagement and may have created interest for the project in the future.

Ulhaq:

I think each student should be creating the same product at the end, unless the different products are very clearly laid out in terms of standards and learning goals. The choice of who to put in what role was a simulation of an actual campaign but was arbitrary in terms of learning the content.

(To clarify, the combining of groups had to do with a response to the previous year's debate when one of our ELL students was so scared to speak in public that he made up excuses as to why he could not come to school that day.)

Students were also surveyed after the debate. When asked what was the most important thing they learned, one student said, "How to advertise a person effectively to people and how to make things sound good for yourself while sounding bad for your opponent." Another student responded, "I learned how to use rhetoric skills in my debating project." Another student said, "when writing the opening statement, I look at real examples from the previous U.S. candidates and learned that emphasizing is an important method."

When asked if they had any questions about the research process, most students responded that they did not have any. However, one student in particular wondered, "If a website is credible, and academic, and time is about ten years away, can it be cited?" When asked if they would have done anything differently, one student responded, "I wish we could've had more opinions when answering the debate question, due to internet issue, we couldn't gather idea easily although we were able to answer them. Also, I want to speak more concisely next time." Another student said, "I wish that I had tried harder in the first voting round to have my politician win the candidacy." Another student replied, "Before preparing for the debate, I thought that the tasks of the three members of the group were not equally distributed. And I think everyone can participate in the debate and have a right to speak." The responses reflected a clear understanding of the purpose of the project overall and a desire to engage and participate more, if they had a chance to do it again.

Credible Source Quiz Results and Analysis

As depicted in Figure 1, acceptable responses to Scenario 1 included evidence from the CDC, BBC, NPR, and Reuters. Unacceptable responses used Google News and a website called Howafrika.com. The majority of the students made valid assertions and used appropriate evidence to prove their claims.

Scenario 1: You are online and you see someone post the below claim.

Claim: The coronavirus pandemic is a cover for a plan to implant trackable microchips and that the Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates is behind it.

Find a credible source of information that proves or disproves this claim, and respond to the comment with your own claims and evidence. Remember to cite your source(s).

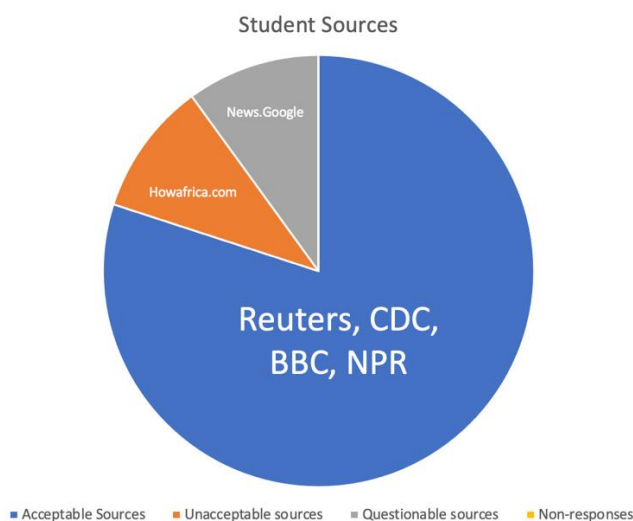


Figure 1. Credible Source Quiz results, Scenario 1.

As depicted in Figure 2, acceptable responses to Scenario 2 included evidence from NASA and the National Climate Assessment. Unacceptable responses used Friends of the Earth and a website called foe.org. The majority of the students made valid assertions and used appropriate evidence to prove their claims.

Scenario 2: You are researching climate change and one of your classmates makes the below statement.

Claim: Climate Change is a hoax.

Find a credible source of information that proves or disproves this claim, and respond to the comment with your own claims and evidence. Remember to cite your source(s).

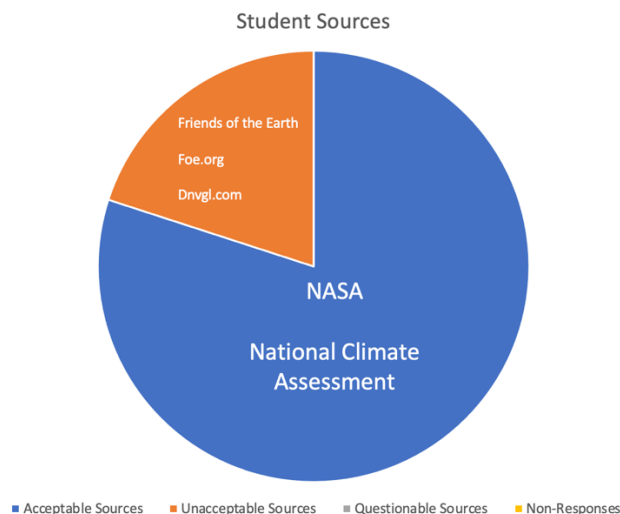


Figure 2. Credible Source Quiz results, Scenario 2.

As depicted in Figure 3, acceptable responses to Scenario 3 included evidence from BestCollegeReviews.org, QS World University Rankings, and topuniversities.com. Questionable responses used US News or lacked specific textual evidence. The majority of the students made valid assertions and used appropriate evidence to prove their claims.

Scenario 3: Your parent tells you that you should go to Europe to study because it has the best universities, but you want to go to America.

Claim: Europe has the best universities in the world.

Find a credible source of information that proves or disproves this claim, and respond to the comment with your own claims and evidence. Remember to cite your source(s).

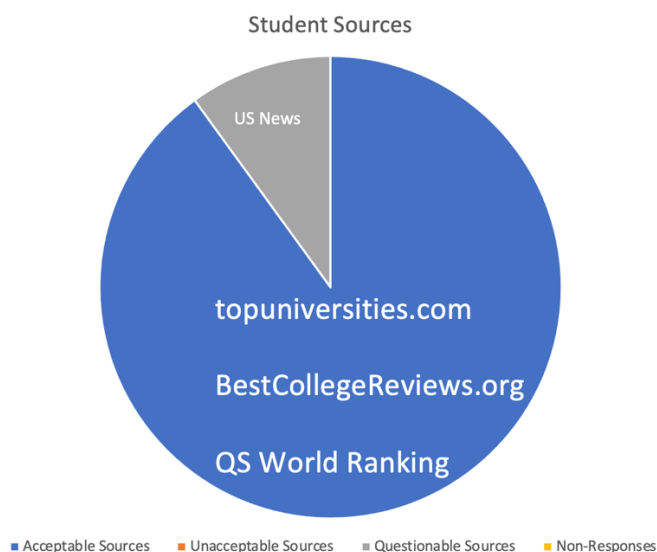


Figure 3. Credible Source Quiz results, Scenario 3.

CONCLUSION

Research-based WAC combined with PBL may help shape high school students into informed contributors to participatory culture. The interdisciplinary project described in this report focused on critical thinking—the ability to evaluate an issue and form a judgement about it—in order to help students to successfully evaluate sources for credibility while avoiding plagiarism. Students shared their research in person and online, and when surveyed about the course, they disclosed being engaged and invested in the process to the point where they wished they could have participated even more than what was required. Although the project was undertaken by American International Grade 12 students in China, it may be applicable in a variety of ways to courses in Western secondary schools, given the global nature of participatory culture.

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Appendix

Mini Research Project Handout

Mini Research Project for _____ (Course Title)

Student's Name: _____

Essential Question:

Before Research: KWL Chart

What do you <u>Know</u> ?	What do you <u>Want</u> to know?	What did you Learn ?
		Note: Complete After Project

While Researching Sources: Find 2 texts and 1 image/video

Text Title and Author's Name	Type of Text	What is the text about? (Summarize)	How does it prove your argument? (Analyze)	What makes the source credible?

Confirm Research: RAVEN Source Credibility Analysis and Check List

For each source you find, consider the following questions.

R – Reputation

What is the reputation of the author, the sources, and the publication? Do past actions or lies indicate the author, sources, or publication may not be reliable? Is the author, source, or publication in a position of authority?

A – Ability to Observe

Is the author in a position that allows access to reliable evidence? If the article is about an event, did the author actually observe the event?

V – Vested Interest

Does the author have a personal stake in the topic or event? Would the author gain anything by lying? Would the author gain anything by telling the truth?

E – Expertise

Does the author have specialized knowledge on the topic or event? Does the evidence come from a source that has expertise on the topic or event?

N – Neutrality

Is the author neutral about the issue or is bias evident? Is the source of the evidence neutral or biased?

<p>Source 1</p> <p>Title: _____ Author: _____</p> <p>Is the source credible? Explain in no less than 5 complete sentences.</p> <p>Relevant Quote 1:</p> <p>Relevant Quote 2:</p>	<p>Source 2</p> <p>Title: _____ Author: _____</p> <p>Is the source credible? Explain in no less than 5 complete sentences.</p> <p>Relevant Quote 1:</p> <p>Relevant Quote 2:</p>	<p>Source 3</p> <p>Title: _____ Author: _____</p> <p>Is the source credible? Explain in no less than 5 complete sentences.</p> <p>Relevant Quote 1:</p> <p>Relevant Quote 2:</p>
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After Research is Confirmed: Annotated Bibliography

Your annotated bibliography must include 2 paragraphs for each source.

Paragraph 1: Summary

- Summarize the entire source and identify the author's claim and main pieces of evidence. (3 sentences minimum)

Paragraph 2: Analysis

- How does the source answer the essential question? Is the source credible? How will you use this source (3 sentences minimum)

Example:

Virgin Hyperloop.” *Virgin Hyperloop*, Virgin, <https://virginhyperloop.com/>. Accessed 24 Jan. 2021.

A hyperloop is a relatively new technology that could possibly revolutionize travel in the United States. The Virgin Hyperloop can travel 1080 kph (670 mph). It is completely electric and has solar panels along the top of the tunnel for instant access to energy at all times. Overall, it is significantly cheaper than building a high-speed railway. Transcontinental travel would take at most 8 hours which would boost the economy and just be helpful for all Americans.

Virgin is a credible source because they have done years of tests for this hyperloop. They work internally but can be trusted because it is in their best interest to have their product go mainstream in the US. We will use this source directly in making policy to support Virgin in their creation of a transcontinental hyperloop.

When Writing MLA Works Cited Citations....

- Go to www.easybib.com
- Copy and paste your URL into the “Cite It” bar > click “Cite It”
- Verify the information in the form, or input the information if necessary
- Click “Create Citation”
- Highlight generated citation > copy
- Return to document > right click > paste

Introduction Paragraph Sentence Templates

It has become common today to dismiss _____.

Conventional wisdom has it that _____.

Common sense has it that _____.

It is often said that _____.

X argues that _____.

Although _____, ultimately _____.

Body Paragraph Sentence Templates

While it is true that _____, many people assume that _____.

Many people assume that _____.

According to X, “ _____ ” (#).

In her book _____, X maintains that “ _____ ” (#).

X agrees when she writes, “ _____ ” (#).

In other words, X believes _____.

X’s point is that _____.

X’s claim that _____ which confirms that _____.

Conclusion Paragraph Sentence Templates

The evidence shows that _____.

While it is true that _____, it does not necessarily follow that _____.

Ultimately, what is at stake here is _____.

Many people assume that _____.

These findings have important implications in the domain of _____.

But above all _____.

Project Rubric:

Does Not Meet	Meets	Exceeds
	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain (RI.1)	
	Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons and evidence. (W.1a)	
	Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases. (W.1b)	
	Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims. (W.1c)	
	Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing. (W.1d)	

	Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented. (W.1e)	
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After the Project: Presentation Commentary

Agreeing:

I agree with _____ that _____.

X is surely not right about _____ because recent studies have shown that _____.

X's theory of _____ is extremely useful because it sheds light on the difficult problem of _____.

Disagreeing:

Although X does not say so directly, she apparently assumes that _____.

Though I concede that _____, I still insist that _____.

X's assertion that _____ does not fit the facts because _____.