

Improving Teaching Practices in Literacy Instruction of Elementary School Teachers
with
Instructional Coaching

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if instructional coaching had an academic impact on one fourth grade classroom and teacher when teaching writing workshop. The instructional coaching technique used by the researcher was the Gradual Release Coaching Cycle. The measurement tool utilized was a pre- and post- opinion writing rubric developed by Anne Arundel County Public School System. After collecting and analyzing data on the pre- and post-rubric of the twenty-nine students in the class, the null hypothesis was rejected because there was a statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-writing assessment. Research should continue because instructional coaching models and instructional coaches are becoming more prominent in school systems across the nation in order to provide support for teachers and improve student achievement.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

The researcher, who has been in education for the past 20 years, has been a literacy teacher for the past 13 years at the elementary level. Most recently, the role of the literacy teacher has evolved in Anne Arundel County Public Schools, where “coaching” novice teachers on new instructional programs and strategies has become a priority. Becoming a highly qualified teacher in this day and age has its pressures, and when a school establishes a strong mentoring or coaching atmosphere between a master and novice teacher, obstacles and dilemmas in the classroom can be avoided with proper planning and collaboration (Callahan, 2016).

Instructional coaches have become prominent in school districts and school buildings across the nation. Instructional coaches and their roles can look different depending on the school district’s need and funding. One type of instructional coach is a literacy coach, who in its most basic sense, “provides job-embedded, context-specific, ongoing support to teachers and students, in order to improve instructional practices and raise student achievement” (Casey, 2006, p. 4). Various models exist in the educational world when instructional coaching is considered. Most models follow a similar cycle for coach and teacher: planning, teaching, and reflecting (Suarez, 2017). The process between the coach and teacher is collaborative where communication is necessary, and student achievement and teacher improvement is at the forefront.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact that instructional literacy coaching, specifically the Gradual Release Coaching Cycle, has on one fourth grade classroom and teacher when teaching writing workshops.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis of this study is there will be no relationship between utilizing the Gradual Release Coaching Cycle and student success in fourth grade writer's workshop as determined by a pre and post writing rubric. Students whose classroom teacher receives daily instructional coaching by a literacy coach will perform the same on average as similar students whose teacher does not receive daily instructional coaching as measured by a pre and post writing rubric.

Operational Definitions

Multiple methods and frameworks exist for instructional coaching. In this study, the **Gradual Release Coaching Cycle** will be utilized, which is **the dependent variable**. The design provides teachers with "side-by-side support in the classroom over a period of consecutive days as teachers develop aspects of their teaching practice" (Casey, 2006, p. 133). It was developed by David Pearson and Maria Gallagher in 1983 and has four phases that a literacy coach can follow. In Phase one, the coach models lessons and thinks aloud so that the teacher can see and hear some of the in-the-moment decision-making strategies the coach is using. In Phase two, the students in the classroom try out what the coach models. Continual assessment and adjustments are made throughout this phase. In phase three, side-by-side teaching occurs with the coach and teacher. The coach is responsible for scaffolding expectations and adjusting the lesson to assist with student success. In phase four, the teacher practices applying the skills

and strategies learned and takes responsibility for a majority of the decision making in the classroom.

The **independent variable** in this study will be the **student success or growth in fourth grade writer's workshop as determined by a pre and post writing rubric**. Writing workshop is a structure that teachers use to instruct their children in writing which involves an "I do, we do, you do" methodology. The teacher makes instructional decisions on the lesson based on individual or small group conferences.

CHAPTER II

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review explores the impact of instructional coaching on elementary school teachers and describes how it improves their teaching practices in literacy instruction. Section one introduces the concept of instructional coaching. Section two discusses instructional coaching models found in research. Section three investigates research that illustrates the impact instructional coaching has on teaching and learning. Section four provides a summary.

What is Instructional Coaching?

Over time, instructional coaching has become increasingly more important in school districts. Leaders within a school system rely on instructional coaches to enhance their teachers' understanding of content, process, and procedures in the classroom setting. According to the "Multidisciplinary Framework of Instructional Coaching," federal legislative initiatives, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 and Race to the Top Act of 2011 have brought to the forefront the need to support teachers' use of evidence-based practices for improving student learning and behaviors (Glover, Kurz, & Reddy, 2017). Furthermore, these initiatives have "situated coaching as a key element in driving school reform and providing sustained, job-embedded, and individualized professional development" (p. 66).

The concept of a coach, more specifically a literacy coach, developed in the 1920s, and quickly has become the number one staff development model (Casey, 2006). Coaching can be defined as "sustained class-based support from a qualified and knowledgeable individual who models research-based strategies and explores with teachers how to increase these practices using the teacher's own students" (Walkowiak, 2016, p. 15). Regardless of the model the instructional coach is following, the coaching cycle seems to generally follow the same

procedures. In the simplest sense, instructional coaches focus on three essential elements when mentoring a teacher: planning, teaching, and reflection (Suarez, 2017). The planning time allows the teacher and coach to collaborate and have conversations regarding the area of need. The teacher selects a goal within an instructional block, with the assistance of the coach, while focusing on strengths in instruction and learning but moving the teacher toward highly effective practices. The second stage of the cycle, teaching, varies depending on the goal. For instance, the coach could model a lesson while the teacher observes, teach in collaboration with the teacher, or the coach could provide the teacher feedback while observing the teacher with a specific goal in mind. Finally, during the reflection stage, the teacher and coach have conversations about the learning, revise the goal or set a new goal, and the cycle begins again.

In order to leverage change in a school building, instructional coaches should ideally possess certain leadership characteristics. In its essence, instructional coaching is job-embedded professional development. According to Desimone & Pak (2017), “mentoring and coaching teachers enhances teaching practice” (p.4). Common Core standards have raised the bar for both teachers and students in schools across the country. Furthermore, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2000 “emphasized the need for highly qualified reading teachers and the use of scientifically-based practices” (p.4). In order to enhance teaching practices, coaches need to possess certain attributes including effective communication skills, the ability to establish trust with teachers, show value for teachers’ ideas, set focused and narrow goals to maximize instructional growth, and to focus on conversations centered around student and professional growth (Walkowiak, 2016).

Instructional Coaching Models

Over the years, various methods of instructional coaching have evolved and have been applied in a variety of settings, ranging from pre-school settings to secondary education settings. Some common practices or methods include technical coaching, collegial coaching, cognitive coaching, peer coaching, and content-focused coaching (Casey, 2006). As with any structure or model, there are multiple versions or ways of conducting instructional coaching. Presented below are descriptions of a few models that would be appropriate to utilize with elementary teachers in a literacy structure.

One model, The Multidisciplinary Framework, was investigated and suggested by Glover, et al. in 2017. They revealed that there are overlap and similarities in coaching in education, sports, and business and wanted to capitalize on these similarities when they offered their approach. Within this model, coaching is defined “based on a coach’s actions, the scope of the coaching focus, and desired coaching outcomes” (p. 73). The coaching framework consists of questioning and self-reflection, assessing or synthesizing data to identify needs for teachers and students, goal setting for improvement, planning, demonstration or modeling, critiquing or feedback, evaluation, and adjusting or making changes to refine implementation.

Another model, The Classroom Strategies Coaching Model, or CSC, is a “collaborative intervention centered on using multiple classroom observations to gather data and generate feedback for promoting changes in teachers’ use of empirically supported instructional and behavioral management strategies” (Dudek, Lekwa, & Reddy, 2017, p. 47). Classroom observations are key to this approach. An empirically validated classroom observation assessment, such as the Classroom Strategies Assessment System (CSAS), gathers data on classroom practices and generates performance feedback for guiding the coach and teacher. This

allows for a collaborative data-driven process which can enhance a teacher's instructional effectiveness. In a study conducted with 89 participating teachers in New Jersey, the CSC model was used over a four-week period. Results showed that the model was a valid intervention for improving teachers' classroom practices. Teachers self-reported that instructional improvements were noted, although this could have been a personal perception.

Peer coaching, which is utilized in pre-service training programs for teachers, has slowly carried over into the school setting. Relationship building, respected opinions, and collaborative feedback are common threads described by researchers in instructional coaching and mentoring (Connor, 2017). Peer coaching is rooted in these practices. As a professional development model, peer coaching differs from some of the instructional coaching frameworks in that it utilizes teachers housed within the same school building as the new teachers. It is non-evaluative, supportive, cost-effective, and goal-oriented (Johnson, Finlon, Koback, & Izard, 2017). One program, COACH, or The Colleague Observation and Coaching program aims to enhance student-teacher interactions through peer observations, peer discussions, and reflections. This model was tested in a study with preschool teachers and classes. The key component to the practice was the praise-question-polish feedback technique where the coach found strengths in a pre-observation, questioned techniques that needed shaping in the instructional setting, and helped the teacher polish strategies collaboratively as a team.

Regardless of the technique used in instructional coaching, commonalities among the frameworks described are apparent. Observations of teachers, paired with timely and explicit feedback is an integral part of many coaching models (Connor, 2017). Building trustworthy relationships between mentor and teacher aids in providing feedback that is constructive and data

driven. Instructional coaching is non-evaluative and should be viewed as on the job training or professional development.

The Impact of Literacy Coaching on Teaching and Learning

An experienced teacher who continuously learns and grows in the profession will succeed in the classroom. Research suggests that it takes three to seven years to become experienced enough to be considered “highly qualified” in the teaching profession (Callahan, 2016). As of 2016, it was discovered that one-third of teachers leave the classroom within the first five years, post-graduation. Wilder (2014) of Clemson University states, “The pressure on school districts to improve adolescent achievement often results in instructional coaches being asked to single-handedly facilitate school change regardless of the numerous organizational challenges” (p. 160). He continues by saying that collaboration with a coach leads to change in a teacher’s attitude, beliefs, and practices which will naturally improve student learning.

Not only is the work of instructional coaches important in the school system, but literacy coaches have changed instructional practices of teachers as well. Dixon’s 2016 research article in the *Illinois Reading Council Journal* focuses on the work of literacy coaches. Dixon believes that the main purpose of literacy coaches is to work side by side with other educators in implementing effective instructional practices in literacy in order to support positive outcomes for students. This is impactful because the outcome should always be the students’ learning, not just whether the teacher had an increase in “effective to highly effective” on a yearly rating. The work of literacy coaches has not been easy. In fact, it has been scrutinized and analyzed over the past few years. The goal of the literacy teacher is to “serve teachers through ongoing, comprehensive professional development consistent with a system of theory, demonstration, practice, and feedback” (Walpole & Blamey, 2008, p. 222). The reality is that a literacy coach

assumes various duties within a schoolhouse depending on the demands of the principal and teachers they serve.

Recent survey research suggested teachers who were reluctant to implement new practices in literacy became confident over time with the assistance of a literacy coach. Moreover, literacy practices became more effective within a teacher's classroom (Dixon, 2016). In this study, surveys were given to teachers to rate their comfort with various parts of the reading block and coaching process. Most teachers started the process with a negative perception about the coach and had weaknesses noted in guided reading. By the end of the process, the final surveys indicated more confidence with new reading practices in guided reading and contained positive comments about the coach because of the relationship that was built from the start of the process.

Summary

Instructional coaching is a concept and framework that has been developed over time in many venues, from pre-service teacher training to in-house professional development. Instructional coaches are needed more and more in schools and classrooms across the country to support teachers and student learning. Many models exist in the coaching realm, several of which were reviewed above. The similarities among these models include collaboration with the teacher, observation, modeling of practices, and feedback that is specific to a goal. Even though teachers may initially be reluctant to participate in the process of coaching, instructional coaching has a positive effect on teaching practices and student learning and growth.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact that instructional literacy coaching, specifically the Gradual Release Coaching Cycle, had on one fourth grade classroom and novice teacher when teaching a writing workshop. Writing workshop, specifically goal setting, rubrics, and student checklists, and conferencing were selected because of a school-wide focus from the yearly school improvement plan. Student evaluation and success was determined by a pre- and post-writing rubric.

Participants

There are twenty-nine fourth grade students ranging in age from nine to ten years old participating in this study. The study was conducted at a public school in a suburban area of Severna Park, Maryland. The study took place in a heterogeneously grouped fourth grade classroom during the writing workshop block. Of the selected sample of students, twenty students are females and nine students are males. Within this sample, there are no students with Individualized Education Plans or IEPs, and one student has a 504 plan. There are four students within the sample that are identified as English Language Learners. The fourth-grade teacher is new to the profession. The study was conducted during the months of January, February, and the first week in March of the teacher's first year as a classroom teacher. The researcher, who was responsible to coach the new teacher, has fourteen years' experience as a literacy coach and teacher and twenty years' experience as an elementary school teacher.

Design

This study used a quasi-experimental pre-test, post-test design to determine the effect of the Gradual Release Coaching model with a novice classroom teacher and one fourth grade class during writing workshop. A convenience method of sampling was utilized. An entire classroom of twenty-nine students were given pre- and post-tests so the researcher could compare their opinion writing scores before the coaching cycle and determine gains, if any, after the coaching cycle was utilized.

Materials

A county wide writing program was adopted by the school system two years ago called the Units of Study, by Lucy Calkin. The program follows a writing workshop structure and teaches children different genres of writing throughout the school year. During the research, the students in fourth grade were learning about personal opinion essays. The researcher and classroom teacher created a pre- and post- personal opinion writing prompt. A county created rubric and writing checklist from Lucy Calkin's program evaluated the students' writing before the unit and after the unit of study.

Procedure

The study occurred over an eight-week period in the winter of 2020 for one fourth grade classroom. At the end of the eight weeks, the researcher/coach and classroom teacher expected the students to be able to write a personal opinion essay. A pre-writing prompt was given in the beginning to determine strengths and needs within the classroom. The same writing rubric was used to score the beginning writing sample and the final writing sample, after the coaching cycle and teaching were complete. Weekly instruction was delivered to the whole group and smaller groups based on need throughout the daily lessons. Both teachers, the classroom teacher and

literacy coach, planned and delivered the lessons according to the Gradual Release Coaching Cycle.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact that instructional literacy coaching, specifically the Gradual Release Coaching Cycle, had on one fourth grade classroom and novice teacher when teaching a writing workshop. This study sampled one classroom of fourth graders taught by the same elementary teacher. There were twenty-nine fourth grade students, who were heterogeneously grouped, ranging in age from nine to ten years old that participated in this study. Of the selected sample of students, twenty students are females and nine students are males. Student progress was evaluated over a six-week period during the writing workshop block before and after the Gradual Coaching cycle (dependent variable) was used with the novice teacher. This method, in its simplest form, provided the novice teacher with side-by-side support in the classroom over a period of days. The researcher was able to continually provide collaborative planning, modeling, and timely feedback to the teacher. The rubric used to evaluate progress remained the same, as well as the genre of writing that was taught to the students. The results of this study are outlined below.

Table 1 shows the pre and post results of the twenty-nine students from the opinion writing rubric. The same rubric was used before and after the six week period. The rubric measured different parts of the writing process for a total of ten points.

Table 1

Pre and Post Score of Student Writing Samples

Name	Pre Score	Post Score	Gain
1	2.8	8.2	5.4
2	7	8.2	1.2
3	7	6.8	-0.2
4	0	6.8	6.8

5	0	7.6	7.6
6	0	6.2	6.2
7	0	6.2	6.2
8	2.8	8.8	6
9	0	5.6	5.6
10	1.4	5.6	4.2
11	0	10	10
12	2.8	10	7.2
13	5.6	10	4.4
14	7	10	3
15	7	10	3
16	7	10	3
17	5.6	10	4.4
18	4.2	10	5.8
19	4.2	10	5.8
20	7.6	9.4	1.8
21	8.2	9.4	1.2
22	3.4	9.4	6
23	5.6	9.4	3.8
24	4.2	10	5.8
25	7	10	3
26	5.6	10	4.4
27	5.6	10	4.4
28	1.4	7.6	6.2
29	7	9.4	2.4

Table 2 shows that there was a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.000$) between the pre and post writing assessment. Figure 1 shows the mean and median of the pre and post test score. The difference between the medians was tested rather than using a t test to test the difference of the means. The results showed significant differences between the pre-score and post-score results for all students. Based on these results, the classroom and teacher benefited from the Gradual Release Model of coaching during writing instruction. The findings from this study and the implications from the data collected will be compared, interpreted, and discussed in Chapter V.

Table 2

Analysis of Pre and Post Score of Writing Samples

	Pre Score	Post Score	Significant Test between Pre and Post Median Scores
Mean	4.138	8.779	p=0.000
Median	4.200	9.400	
N	29	29	
Std. Deviation	2.8041	1.5365	

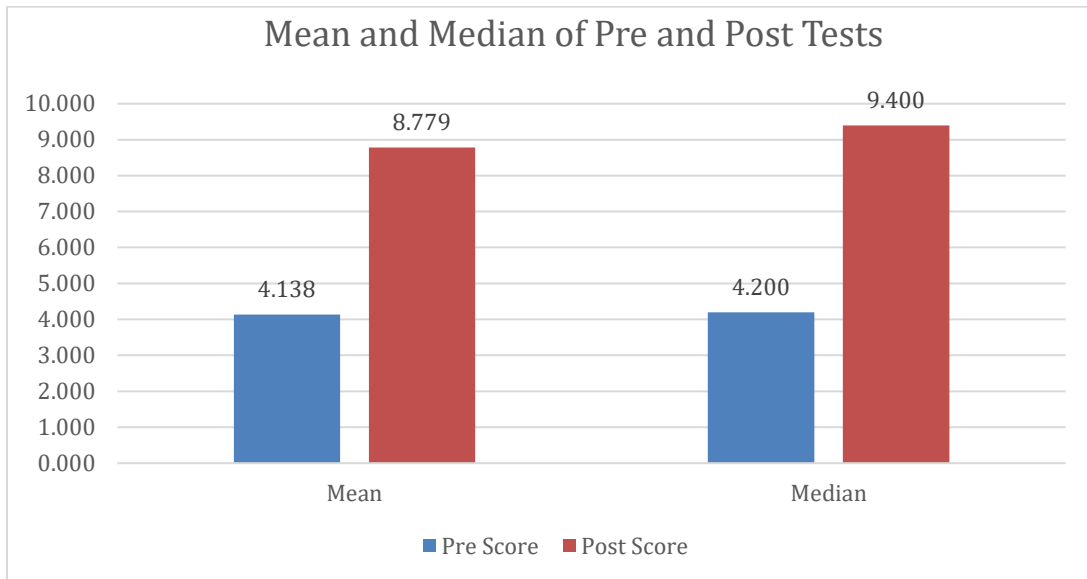


Figure 1. Mean and Median of Pre and Post Tests

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The researcher completed this study to determine the impact that instructional literacy coaching, specifically the Gradual Release Coaching Cycle, had on one fourth grade classroom and teacher when teaching writing workshop. The null hypothesis of this study was that there would be no relationship between utilizing the Gradual Release Coaching Cycle and student success in fourth grade writer's workshop as determined by a pre and post writing rubric. The pre- and post-writing rubric utilized were exactly the same and measured different parts of opinion writing, such as structure, organization, and elaboration. After collecting and analyzing data on the pre and post rubric of the twenty-nine students in the class, the null hypothesis was rejected since there was a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.000$) between the pre- and post- writing assessment, as shown in Chapter IV.

Implications of the Results

The results of this study suggest that using an instructional coaching model, such as the Gradual Release Model, improves student achievement and is beneficial to a classroom as a whole. As shown in Chapter IV, twenty-eight out of twenty-nine fourth grade students improved their opinion writing scores and craft as determined by the pre- and post- rubric. One student had a negative gain from the pre- to the post-writing sample; however, it should be noted that his/her loss still resulted in a score in the proficient range.

The results indicate that one reason why students made such gains in their writing is because of the coaching model that was put in place in this teacher's classroom. When teachers have support and a model for teaching, then their learning improves and grows. Teachers should have opportunities for professional feedback without critique and a rating from an administrator.

The Gradual Release Coaching model allowed the novice teacher time to learn how to explicitly teach the writing workshop model by watching the researcher teach, learn from the researcher's experience as a classroom teacher, and collaborate and change lessons on a daily basis. In building a strong relationship with the fourth grade teacher, the novice teacher trusted the researcher and allowed her to assist in the classroom like it was her own.

Threats to Validity

One external threat to the validity of the study was the small number of students participating. Only one fourth grade class with a total of twenty-nine students was used to instruct and analyze data. Also, only one teacher utilized the coaching model with the researcher. Having more teachers and students in the study could have given the researcher more statistical power and made it easier to identify differences in pre-test and post-test scores on the rubric. Also, it could have been helpful to compare scores from one fourth grade class who received the instructional coaching with another class that did not receive the instructional coaching model. In other words, the class that the researcher selected was the fourth grade class with a new teacher. If the researcher chose a class with an experienced teacher, and performed the same study, would the results be the same?

One internal threat to the validity of the study would be the rubric or instrument used to assess the achievement of the students before and after the coaching model was used. A writing rubric is typically subjective. Teachers use their judgement when looking at a student's writing. Although there were parameters and descriptors underneath each rubric score, the teacher and researcher may have scored each writing sample differently. In other words, were samples scored based on how the child actually did, or were samples scored based on growth for that

particular child? If there was a larger sample of students, then the researcher may have had a greater chance to see how valid the instrument or rubric was.

Connections to Previous Studies and Existing Literature

In Chapter II, previous research and literature is discussed specifically in the area of instructional coaching. Different instructional coaching models are presented, as well as the role and characteristics of school based instructional coaches. The coaching cycle used in this study was based on a side-by-side support model developed by Pearson and Gallagher in 1983. The researcher and fourth grade classroom teacher followed the four phases suggested by the model. More specifically, instructional and coaching flowed from modeling to side-by-side teaching to finally release of decision making to the classroom teacher. It was a beneficial model to test because the researcher was available daily throughout the process. The researcher also had knowledge and experience with the practice.

The literature in Chapter II also suggests that federal legislative initiatives, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 and Race to the Top Act of 2011 have brought to the forefront the need to support teachers' use of evidence-based practices for improving student learning and behaviors (Glover et al., 2017). This relates directly to the current study because student achievement in one classroom drastically improved when the Gradual Release Coaching Cycle was put into place. A post-test rubric documented the achievement in this fourth grade class.

Implications for Future Research

The results of this study suggested that instructional coaching improved student achievement during writing workshop in one fourth grade class. In the future, it would be beneficial to try this study with multiple classrooms, across multiple grade levels, with varying teacher ability. One

group of twenty-nine fourth graders is a small sample. If the researcher had more time, a larger sample across grade levels would give this study more validity. The same type of writing could be taught with the same rubric to test the null hypothesis, with a larger sampling with more variety.

Also, there was an exclusion of teacher input before and after the study was done. In other words, a survey could be developed to get the teacher's input before and after the coaching model was put into place. If the researcher knew how the teacher "felt" before the Gradual Release Coaching Cycle started, then the results could be more valid. In the future, a pre-test and post-test survey with the teacher or teachers could give more insight into the actual instructional coaching model used.

Conclusion and Summary

In this study, the impact of instructional coaching and teaching practices were investigated by looking at student achievement. One classroom of twenty-nine students and one first year teacher were examined as part of this study. The Gradual Release Coaching Cycle was put into place and the researcher played the role of instructional coach. The coach and classroom teacher went through the four phases of the coaching cycle during daily writing workshop for a six week period of time. Pre- and post-test data were examined with a writing rubric. Although the study had threats to both internal and external validity, the null hypothesis was rejected because statistically significant differences were noted in the pre and post test data.

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Appendix A

Personal Opinion Essay Rubric

	Not Yet Score Point 0	Starting To Score Point 1.4	Yes Score Point 2	Points
STRUCTURE				
W.4.1.a Lead	Does not introduce a topic/text AND does not state an opinion	Introduces a topic/text AND states an opinion	Clearly introduces a topic/text AND states an opinion	
W.4.1.a Organization	Does not create an organizational structure that lists reasons	Creates an organizational structure that lists reasons	Creates an organizational structure that groups related ideas to support the writer's purpose	
W.4.1.c Transitions	Does not use linking words to connect opinion and reasons	Uses linking words OR phrases to connect opinion and reasons	Uses linking words AND phrases to connect opinion and reasons	
W.4.1.d Closure	Does not provide a concluding statement or section	Provides a concluding statement or section	Provides a concluding statement or section related to the opinion presented	
DEVELOPMENT				
W.4.1.b Elaboration	Does not provide reasons that support the opinion	Provides reasons that support the opinion	Provides reasons that are supported by facts and details	