

Case Study: Teaching the CER Writing Strategy in a Middle School Classroom

Observer: Independent Educator Coach

Grade Level: 7th Grade

Class Size: 7 students

Focus: Day 1 and Day 2 of CER instruction (Introduction and Partner Practice)

Day 1: Introducing CER & Whole-Class Modeling

What the Teacher Did:

- The teacher began with an engaging introduction linking middle schoolers' natural love of arguing to learning how to argue effectively in writing using Claim, Evidence, and Reasoning (CER).
- She wrote "Claim," "Evidence," and "Reasoning" on the board and defined each part clearly with guiding questions.
- Using the topic "Middle School should have recess," she modeled thinking aloud to write a claim, solicited evidence ideas from students, helped narrow down key evidence, and then modeled reasoning by explaining why the evidence supported the claim.
- The teacher wrote the whole graphic organizer on chart paper, reading it aloud and revising it with student input.
- She then modeled writing a full CER paragraph from the organizer, emphasizing how to avoid repeating information and how to sequence claim, evidence, and reasoning.
- The lesson ended with a fun celebration where the teacher led mock toasts and claps to acknowledge the students' work.

What Happened:

- Students were engaged and eager to share their own examples of arguments from daily life, which helped build a connection to the lesson.
- Most students understood the definitions and could contribute evidence ideas.
- Some students initially struggled to distinguish between evidence and reasoning but gradually improved during the modeling.
- The teacher's think-aloud and step-by-step writing process helped clarify the paragraph structure.

Student Work Sample:

Graphic Organizer (partial, from class brainstorm):

- **Claim:** Middle schoolers should have recess.
- **Evidence:** Little kids get recess; recess helps kids take breaks; recess helps focus in class.
- **Reasoning:** Middle schoolers are kids too, so they need breaks like little kids; taking breaks helps students recharge and do better in school.

Paragraph excerpt written as a class:

“Middle schoolers should have recess. Kids in middle school need recess like little kids. After all, they are kids, too. Recess helps students take breaks so they can focus better in class. It is so important that middle schoolers get to have recess.”

What Needed Improvement:

- Some students needed more support distinguishing reasoning from evidence. The teacher noted she would add more examples next time.
- A few students were hesitant to speak up initially; the teacher planned to incorporate more think-pair-share to build confidence.
- Time was tight; the teacher decided to spread modeling and practice over two days to allow deeper processing.

Day 2: Partner Practice — Planning & Drafting a CER Paragraph

What the Teacher Did:

- Began with a quick CER review, showing the class paragraph from Day 1 and highlighting claim, evidence, and reasoning in different colors.
- Guided the class to brainstorm multiple topics on a web chart, then assigned pairs to choose one topic.
- Students wrote their claims and read them aloud to the teacher for feedback.
- Partners worked collaboratively on the graphic organizer, brainstorming evidence and reasoning.
- The teacher circulated, asking questions like “What facts support your claim?” and “How does that prove your point?”
- Provided sentence frames and word banks to support writing.
- Modeled writing alongside students on the smart board, showing how to turn organizer notes into sentences.
- Ended with partner reading and positive feedback on paragraph drafts.

What Happened:

- Most pairs successfully wrote clear claims and identified supporting evidence.
- One pair chose “Why is recycling important?” Their claim: “Recycling is important because it helps protect the environment.”
Their evidence: “Recycling reduces waste in landfills and conserves resources.”
Reasoning: “Reducing waste helps keep the earth clean, and conserving resources ensures we don’t run out.”
- Some students struggled to explain reasoning fully; the teacher prompted with sentence starters like “This shows that...”
- Students were enthusiastic about peer feedback but needed reminders to focus on constructive comments.

Student Work Sample:

Claim: “Pets should be allowed at school.”

Evidence: “Pets can help reduce stress and make students feel happy.”

Reasoning: “When students are less stressed, they can concentrate better on their work.”

Draft paragraph excerpt:

“Pets should be allowed at school. Pets can help reduce stress and make students feel happy. When students are less stressed, they can concentrate better on their work. This makes the school a better place for learning.”

What Needed Improvement:

- Some students’ evidence was too general or opinion-based; the teacher planned to emphasize using facts or examples next lesson.
- A few pairs rushed through brainstorming without discussing reasoning deeply. The teacher planned to scaffold this step more explicitly.
- One student needed extra support with writing mechanics; the teacher worked closely with this student during writing time.

Adjustments Made by the Teacher:

- Increased use of sentence frames and word banks for scaffolding.
- Planned to add mini-lessons on distinguishing fact-based evidence from opinion.
- Decided to incorporate more think-pair-share and small group discussions to build confidence.

- Created a checklist reminder to help students avoid repeating information in evidence and reasoning.
- Scheduled extra writing time over multiple days to accommodate varied student needs.

Summary

The teacher effectively introduced the CER writing strategy with engaging modeling and scaffolding. Students responded well to the interactive, step-by-step approach and showed growing understanding of claim, evidence, and reasoning. While some students needed additional support distinguishing evidence from reasoning and focusing on fact-based evidence, the teacher's adjustments and planned strategies indicate a responsive approach to student needs. Partner collaboration and teacher modeling helped build writing confidence, setting a strong foundation for independent CER writing.