

Grade 8

An Opinion Piece
(a Letter to the Editor)



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The Task

Students were asked to write a letter to the editor giving an opinion about a current issue. They were reminded to support their points of view with relevant facts and to be clear and persuasive. They were to use the writing process described on pages 6 and 11 of *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1–8: Language, 1997*. Students were reminded to check their work for errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

The following are the “overall expectations” that relate to this task:

By the end of Grade 8, students will:

- communicate ideas and information for a variety of purposes and to specific audiences, using forms appropriate for their purpose and features appropriate to the form;
- use writing for various purposes and in a range of contexts (e.g., to clarify personal concerns and to explore social issues);
- organize information and ideas creatively as well as logically, using paragraph structures (e.g., to develop a comparison or establish a cause-and-effect relationship);
- use a wide variety of sentence types and sentence structures, with conscious attention to style;
- revise and edit their work independently or using feedback from their peers;
- proofread and correct their final drafts, focusing on grammar, spelling, punctuation, and conventions of style;
- use and spell correctly the vocabulary appropriate for this grade;
- use correctly the conventions (e.g., grammar, punctuation, spelling) specified for this grade.

During this task, students focused on the first three “overall expectations” and worked on the following selected “expectations in specific areas” from the Grade 8 curriculum:

By the end of Grade 8, students will:

- use more complex sentence structures correctly;
- select and use their words with increasing sophistication and effectiveness.

Previous Learning Experiences

It was suggested that before attempting the task, students should have had experience with the following:

- writing letters
- opportunities to state their opinions and support their opinions with reasons
- previous experiences with process writing
- using a dictionary and thesaurus when writing
- comparing their work to criteria outlined on task-specific charts like the rubrics included in this booklet

The Process Used

Teachers used the following process:

Prewriting, Part 1. Students compared sample letters from newspapers or the Internet to determine what makes an effective letter to the editor using a work sheet entitled “Reviewing Letters to the Editor” in the student package. The class identified the differences in format among letters to the editor, friendly letters, and business letters.

Students brainstormed current issues (global, school, or community), recorded them on chart paper, and identified the issues that concerned them most. They then worked in pairs to research a selected issue using the “Research Guide” in the student package (or a similar alternative).

Prewriting, Part 2. Using the following cooperative learning strategy, students learned to support their opinions with facts.

Four Corners

Four locations in the classroom were designated as “Strongly Agree”, “Agree Somewhat”, “Mildly Disagree”, and “Strongly Disagree”.

Strongly Agree	Agree Somewhat
Mildly Disagree	Strongly Disagree

The teacher then made a statement about a movie, book, or TV show (e.g., “the best film of the decade”), and students went to the location that matched their opinion. As a group, students discussed the reasons for their opinions and presented their points of view to the class. They then tried to persuade others to agree with them. Students were allowed to change their corners as their opinions changed.

Reviewing the criteria. Teachers reviewed with their students the criteria for an effective letter using a checklist included in the student package (or any similar alternative).

Drafting. Students wrote their letters to the editor using the work sheet “First Draft of My Letter to the Editor” in the student package.

Editing. Students edited their work and then worked in pairs to complete a peer edit of their work (using the guideline in the student package) before writing their final copies.

Publishing. Students revised their compositions using the suggestions from their peer editors and wrote their final copies using resources such as computers, dictionaries, and thesauruses.

Reflecting. Students reflected on the process they had used by filling out the reflection sheets provided in their student packages.

Teachers then evaluated students’ work using the rubric reproduced on the next page.

Grade 8: Rubric for an Opinion Piece (a Letter to the Editor)

Categories	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Reasoning	The student:			
– complexity of ideas	– writes a few simple, undeveloped ideas	– writes and develops a variety of simple ideas	– writes and develops ideas of some complexity	– develops ideas fully to create greater understanding
– exploration of social issues and clarification of personal concerns	– states facts about a social issue, but shows little understanding of it	– shows some understanding of a social issue	– shows understanding and personal concern about a social issue	– shows thorough understanding and commitment about a social issue
– number and relevance of supporting details	– provides very few facts supporting his or her point of view	– provides some supporting evidence for his or her point of view	– supports his or her point of view with relevant facts	– supports his or her point of view fully with relevant facts
Communication	The student's letter:			
– purpose (to express an opinion in a letter to the editor)	– states facts	– attempts to persuade	– is persuasive	– is very persuasive
– voice (opinion)	– contains no clear opinion or point of view	– contains an opinion somewhat clearly expressed	– contains an opinion or point of view expressed clearly	– contains an opinion or point of view expressed clearly and convincingly
– clarity and precision of ideas	– contains few ideas and facts clearly stated	– contains some ideas and facts clearly stated, but which may be repetitive	– contains ideas and facts that are mostly clearly stated	– contains all or almost all ideas and facts clearly and concisely stated
– word use and vocabulary	– contains little or no evidence of new vocabulary	– contains some new vocabulary	– contains vocabulary that suits the purpose and audience	– contains new words or special terminology that supports the opinion presented
– sentence variety (structure, type, length)	– relies on one sentence type	– contains a variety of sentences	– contains a wide variety of sentences	– contains a wide variety of sentences used effectively
Organization	In the student's letter:			
– overall structure (introduction, body, conclusion)	– there is no clear overall structure or organization	– there is some evidence of a structure or organization	– the organization is logical and appropriate	– the organization supports the purpose and enhances the argument
	– very little attempt has been made to define the issue in the introduction	– the issue is mentioned in the introduction, but is not clearly defined	– the issue is defined in the introduction, and the introduction and conclusion are connected	– the introduction clearly defines the issue, captures the reader's attention, and is connected to the conclusion
	– there is no summary or clear call to action	– some attempt has been made to summarize the issue	– the final paragraph summarizes the issue and suggests further action	– the issue is summarized and the action required is clear and compelling
Conventions	In the student's letter:			
– grammar, spelling, punctuation	– there are several major errors or omissions	– there are several minor errors or omissions	– there are only a few minor errors or omissions	– there are practically no errors or omissions
– visual presentation (e.g., indentations, spacing, margins, letter format, italics, font)	– few aspects of the expected visual presentation are evident	– some aspects of the expected visual presentation are evident	– the visual presentation is appropriate	– the visual presentation is effective

Would you?

Dear Editor,

What do you think about school uniforms in your school? Would you wear them? Or would you switch schools?

I think that if students wear these uniforms it will give the school more respect. Also I think that if our students in our society won't care about their individuality.

If students wear these uniforms it will give respect to them. I also think that the students self-esteem will be better because they won't have to worry about being in fashion.

If students in our society wear these uniforms there will be a decrease of the sales in clothes. This will make students not make fun of other students.

If all students wear the same clothes won't make fun of other students because they will be wearing the same clothes. This will make the students feel better.

I think that if we put a stop to the uniforms then the teasing will still go on to the students. We need to take action now and prevent the teasing.

We have to be responsible for our actions. If we don't stop the name calling, not wearing the same clothes, and increasing the sale prices of clothes this will all happen.

Teachers' Notes**Reasoning**

- the writer does not take a definite position on the issue
- the writer's argument is not persuasive
- details and facts tend to support both sides of the issue

Communication

- the writer's opinion is not clear
- there is no evidence of the use of new vocabulary, and most of the words used are simple
- there is overuse of the sentence form beginning "If students"

Organization

- there is evidence of some beginning paragraph structure as sentences are connected in pairs
- individual paragraphs have no clear focus
- an attempt is made in the introduction to define the issues
- there is no summary or call to action

Conventions

- some incomplete thoughts are presented as sentences
- there are several major errors in spelling and grammar (e.g., "the teasing will still go on to the students", "there" for "their", and "know" for "now")

Comments

There is no clear opinion stated and no development of an argument. The details are not clear, and the ideas are not organized. There are several major errors in language conventions.

A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Thursday May 28 1998
 The Toronto Star
 26 letters to the editor
 1 Young Street
 Toronto, Ontario
 M5E 1E6

Dear Editor

Do you realize that the amount of violence on TV that kids are coping it every day. Why are TV shows and movies so violent.

TV shows and some movies for young kids are getting to violent. Some kids are copying what is on tv and killing innocent kids or Adults.

I think that they should cut back on the amount of people getting killed on some shows mostly the ones that little people (small kid) watch. like on some shows people are getting killed and fighting throw the hole show and movie like power Rangers and shows like that.

If we don't take action kids will think that it is cool to kill or injure people when it's actually not.

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Teachers' Notes

Reasoning

- the writer shows a beginning level of understanding of an issue using simple logic
- facts presented are not supported with evidence (e.g., “The Young kids are copying what is on tv ...”)

Communication

- the writer has a clear opinion, but the syntax and vocabulary cloud the clarity
- only simple sentences are used

Organization

- there is some evidence of structure
- the conclusion does not suggest a solution to the issue defined in the introduction

Conventions

- there are many errors in spelling and grammar (e.g., “to” for “too”, “fieghting” for fighting) and errors in punctuation (e.g., omission of a question mark)
- the format for a letter is evident

Comments

This student has written some opinions without supporting them with facts. The simple vocabulary and weak syntax and structure match the level 1 descriptors.

A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear editor

What would you do if you went to get a drink of water and the water was brown and contaminated. That is what will happen if we don't take care of our water supply.

In my opinion industries create lots of air pollution. This pollution gets into the water cycle by evaporating and then cooling to form clouds. It falls to the ground in the form of acid rain. I hope this doesn't happen because it could kill many animals that we eat. The acid rain gets into the water cycle by seeping into the water table. This could even affect golf courses. Eventually the rain flows into the sea this could kill fish and I like fishing. The contaminated water then evaporates and continues the cycle.

If we don't do anything about this our water will get contaminated and undrinkable and we all will become sick because everything needs water and if you drink contaminated water you will get sick and if you don't drink water you will dehydrate.

So join my fight to keep our water clean. Help with a community clean up.

Dear editor

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If we don't do anything about this our water will get contaminated and undrinkable and all life will become sick because everything needs water and if you drink contaminated water you will get sick and if you don't drink water you will dehydrate.

So join my fight to keep our water clean. Help with a community clean up.

Teachers' Notes

Reasoning

- the writer writes and develops a few simple ideas (the water cycle)
- the writer presents some facts to support the need to protect the water, but this argument is not focused
- different facts and opinions detract from the logic of the argument (e.g., "I like fishing")

Communication

- the letter attempts to persuade
- there is some use of specific language (e.g., "seeping into the water table")
- some ideas are clearly stated

Organization

- the issue is mentioned in the introduction but is not clearly defined
- there is evidence of an introduction, body, and conclusion
- the issue is not summarized in the conclusion

Conventions

- there are several minor errors in grammar (e.g., "all life will becaus everything needs water") and some spelling errors (e.g., "dosen't", "eventually"), and punctuation errors (no question marks)
- the writer includes a number of run-on sentences

Comments

The letter presents an argument and facts to support it, but the position taken is not clear. The conclusion doesn't summarize the issue. Different issues in the introduction (e.g., golf courses, fishing) detract from the main issue.

Dear Editor,

Do you understand why we have to wear those pain in the neck bike helmets? Me either.

I myself don't wear a bike helmet and I don't see why a teen of any age should have to wear one either. When most people become teenagers they start to mature and quit driving bikes like a wild child.

In my opinion, only children under the age of 12 should have to wear them. I feel this way because most kids around this age are still a little bit wacked and doing crazy things. Also most children around the age of 6 and under are probably still learning to ride a bike. The law people should also do something about that fine, maybe, like lowering it. If they don't change the laws and they

keep the age at 16, the police should have a choice whether to stop the kid or just give him a friendly wave. If the person is driving safely don't stop him, but if he is driving like a crazy wild child, I give them all rights to stop them or give him a warning.

Sure a helmet will protect your head, but if you're driving slowly and safely I don't see why we have to wear them. One consequence though would be, that there are still some crazy drivers and with one wrong turn of the wheel, well you never know.

In conclusion, I would like to say that, if you feel that you can drive a bike without having too bad of an accident, that you should have a choice whether or not to wear one.

Sincerely,

Teachers' Notes

Reasoning

- the letter represents the opinion that teens should not have to wear bike helmets
- the writer does not provide specific facts, but relies only on opinion to support the position
- some ideas cloud the issue (e.g., "crazy drivers")

Communication

- some ideas are clearly stated but are repetitive
- the writer uses very simple vocabulary (e.g., "law people")
- there is an attempt to persuade, but the argument is not convincing

Organization

- the issue is mentioned in the introduction but is not clearly defined
- there is some evidence of structure, but the issue is not summarized
- the conclusion is weak and conditional on circumstances

Conventions

- there are several major errors in conventions (e.g., "without having too bad of an accident")
- the use of colloquialisms is distracting (e.g., "like lowering it", "wacked")
- there are several punctuation errors (e.g., "one wrong turn of the wheel, well you never know")

Comments

There is an attempt to persuade but the argument is not convincing. There are no relevant facts or details to persuade the reader. The author seems to be discussing many sides of the issue. The major errors in the use of language conventions detract from the message.

Dear Editor,

Picture walking down any major street in a big city, in any country. Have you ever not been approached by a homeless person begging for money in these situations? I didn't think so. And what do we do? Ignore them. Most people are afraid they will be mugged or harmed if they stop to offer a handout to these people. "Go get yourself a nice hot meal." one might say, but what about tomorrow? We can't let these people depend on handouts from passersby on street.

Stats Canada states that 31% of all homeless or poor people are single mothers with infants or young children. What are they to do? Give up their children so they can afford a house and food? Why should they be punished like that? Donations and shelters have been established but, they don't seem to be doing anything.

Crime rates may be increasing due to people stealing or killing to get what they want. Suicide

rates may increase due to such people taking their own lives because they've given up hope and don't want to live like this anymore. It is really very sad. Welfare may be an option for people who just don't have enough, but what about people who don't have anything? We need to think about this, we need to take action.

What I think today's society can do is find some way to start an organization with corporate support that can provide such people with money, basic necessities, and housing. Maybe then, we can give these people jobs and they can start a real life. If we try hard enough, and if we care about not only being safe from such people who are dangerous but, for the welfare of these unfortunate people then surely we can accomplish something that will give these people hope and a chance to have a decent life.

Teachers' Notes

Reasoning

- the writer expresses a personal concern and an understanding of the issue
- the writer uses some relevant facts to support the argument

Communication

- the vocabulary used is persuasive (e.g., "punished", "basic necessities")
- the writer uses dialogue and a variety of sentence types
- some language is not clear (e.g., "Have you ever not been approached ...?")

Organization

- the issue is defined in the introduction and the introduction is connected to the conclusion
- the arguments are presented logically; however, some points are not supported (e.g., "Donations and shelters have been established but, they don't seem to be doing anything.")
- the conclusion summarizes the issue and suggests further action

Conventions

- there are a few minor errors in punctuation (e.g., "We need to think about this, we need to take action.")

Comments

The writing communicates some personal concern and some understanding of the issues involved.

Dear Editor,

Would you like to be the next victim of teen violence? As the law stands right now, once you are eighteen, you are considered an adult and you receive adult sentences. The government wants to change the law so fourteen year olds and up can receive adult sentences. I agree. I will explain the following supports through out my letter; Teens know they won't get in a lot of trouble, they think it's okay to be violent and all teens know that violence is wrong.

Teens know they will not get in a lot of trouble if they commit a crime such as murder because the maximum sentence they could receive right now is five years in juvinile detention. This does not seem like a long time when you think about it. If an adult were to do the same crime, they could end up receiving life in prison.

Young offender's think it's okay to be violent because they see their idols doing it on television and movies. If the Young Offender's Act changes the age to fourteen, maybe teens will realize that it's

more serious then some people think and that their idols are doing the wrong thing, even though they are just acting.

Adolescents know that committing a crime is wrong. They know this through education (health and guidance classes), their parents and the community. If they are mature enough to get a driver's license and a job, then they should be mature enough to know what is right and wrong.

If society doesn't do something about changing the age from eighteen to fourteen for young offender's to be able to receive adult sentences, the world will have a higher death rate. Teens will think 'Oh! I just murdered someone and all I got was five years in Juvibile detention.' They will probably commit another crime when they get out!

I think it's time that the government has realized, if the young offender's are mature enough to get their driver's license, then they are mature enough to go to adult prison, and learn what it's really like to serve a sentence.

Teachers' Notes

Reasoning

- the writer shows some understanding of and personal concern about the issue
- the writer supports her opinion with relevant facts
- the writer develops ideas of some complexity and expresses them clearly and persuasively

Communication

- most ideas are clearly stated with a few minor errors
- the vocabulary used suits the audience (e.g., “adolescents”, “mature”)

Organization

- the issue is defined in the introduction and the introduction is connected to the conclusion
- the conclusion summarizes the issue and suggests further action
- the argument is logically presented with a different point developed in each paragraph
- a few minor clarifications in logic are required (e.g., “they think it’s okay to be violent and all teens know that violence is wrong”)

Conventions

- there are only a few minor errors in grammar (e.g., “I think it’s time that the government has realized”, “I will explain the following supports”), in spelling (e.g., “Juvinite”, “offender’s”), and in punctuation

Comments

This letter states a clear opinion and suggests further action on the part of the reader. Most of the ideas and facts are clearly stated and supported with relevant details. Further editing to correct mistakes in language conventions is needed.

“Nuclear Weapons and Testing will Plunge Us Into a Global Fallout”

Dear Editor,

We now have a new member of the nuclear club, India. This should come as no surprise.

In 1995 India was denied the right to test nuclear weapons, and enter the nuclear race. Today, three years later, India has started to test anyway, which seems to me to be much more frightening.

If India has the technology, why need to prove it to the western world? They are basically telling the western countries that third-world countries are now capable of testing and building weapons of mass destruction. This seems to me to look like an unnecessary flex of political muscle and strikes me as a very dangerous and childish act.

Where will it end? Other political unstable countries will follow India’s example, and soon every middle-eastern country will be building and testing nuclear weapons.

If we do not stop India and similar countries, it may be too late, and we will all suffer the consequences. We have seen the horror of this weapon in the past; now we are seeing it again. The only answer is the abolition of all our weapons of mass destruction.

What is the point of possessing these weapons? In my opinion a world where everyone has weapons of mass destruction will not survive for long.

Teachers’ Notes

Reasoning

- the writer develops his ideas to create greater understanding
- the writer shows understanding of and commitment to the social issue (e.g., “strikes me as a very dangerous and childish act”)

Communication

- the writer’s point of view is explained in a persuasive way; however, the writer could have included more supporting details and facts
- facts are presented clearly and concisely

Organization

- the introduction defines the issue and is connected to the conclusion
- the issue is summarized, and the further action required is clear

Conventions

- there are practically no errors other than “political unstable”
- there is correct use of the semicolon

Comments

The student has written a persuasive letter presenting a complex social issue in a clear, concise format. More specific facts to support the opinion would make it even more convincing. For example, why should this “come as no surprise” and what evidence is there to show that other countries will “follow India’s example”?

Dear Editor,

I believe that the prices for recreational activities are outrageous! People are saying that Canada's children are becoming "couch potato kids," but really all that's happening is that the kids' parents are taking one look at the sport prices and turning the other way!

In our small town, prices are sky-high! For figure skating you have to pay a user fee (for the use of the ice), group lesson fees, and, if you are a high-level skater, you need a pair of \$500 skates. If you really want to improve, you need to pay again for "Club Ice," and private lessons for 15 minutes, it costs about \$8.00, per lesson. Then there are those darn expensive competitions!

I've been told that we're lucky to live in a small town, because in cities, prices are even higher! I say, that if the prices rise much more they'll be standing on the moon, waving at us!

As for hockey, well, the hockey players pay more for their equipment than the rest altogether. In our small town they pay about \$600 for (good)

equipment, and about \$160 more to sign up. On the other hand, in Thunder Bay, it costs almost \$500 just to try out! What is this? The price is wrong?

We have one small pool here, and it's not even indoors. So why do we have to pay \$2.50 per swim, when two years ago it was about \$2.00? That really adds up over the summer.

At the closest indoor pool, it costs around \$5.00 for kids, and \$7.00 for adults. How many people love traveling so much that they'll drive for an hour every weekend (or less), to spend two hours in an indoor pool? More than you'd expect, that's for sure!

If we don't do something about the prices of recreational sports, the children of Canada will become couch potatoes. What can we do? We can fund raise. We can help the children who already do (not that it's only kids, it's adults as well). If you don't help, well, then don't complain when your kid is a couch potato.

Sincerely,

Teachers' Notes

Reasoning

- the writer shows a thorough understanding of and commitment to the issue
- the writer supports her point of view fully with relevant facts (e.g., costs of figure skating, hockey, and swimming)

Communication

- the letter is very persuasive with well-supported and convincing arguments
- the sentence variety strengthens the writer's voice; short questions add impact

Organization

- there is a clear introduction, body, and conclusion
- the introduction clearly defines the issue, captures the reader's attention, and is connected to the conclusion
- the body consists of a logical presentation of facts and examples to support the opinion
- the conclusion summarizes the issue and calls for action

Conventions

- the visual presentation is effective
- there are only a few minor errors (e.g., "hockey players pay more for their equipment than the rest altogether" [the rest of what?] and "... and private lessons for 15 minutes, it costs about ...")

Comments

The writer's point of view is clearly stated and well supported by facts. The ideas are logically presented in a convincing way. There are practically no errors in the use of language conventions.