

Revised Edition

Performance

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English Language Arts

8



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Write an Informative or Explanatory Text

1 GETTING THE IDEA

Informational and explanatory texts are types of text that tell readers about a specific topic. **Informational texts** usually provide facts about real-life people and events, while **explanatory texts** generally describe how to do something. In school, you may be asked to write informational and explanatory texts for many different reasons. For example, you may need to write a short how-to guide with steps for completing a science experiment. Or you may write a longer informational report about life in Ancient Rome.

Define Your Topic

In some cases, you may have to choose the topic you will write about. Brainstorm and write down your ideas. Then, choose a focus for your topic that is not too broad or too narrow. In other situations, such as when you are given a specific question or prompt to respond to, your topic is already defined for you. When that is the case, you should pay close attention to the focus of the prompt.

Read the prompt below. Underline the specific topic you should focus on when writing your informational essay.

Based on the information in the text “The History of Mesa Verde National Park,” write an essay that compares and contrasts the different theories about why the Ancient Pueblo people abandoned the Mesa Verde region. Use text evidence to support your ideas.

Form a Thesis Statement

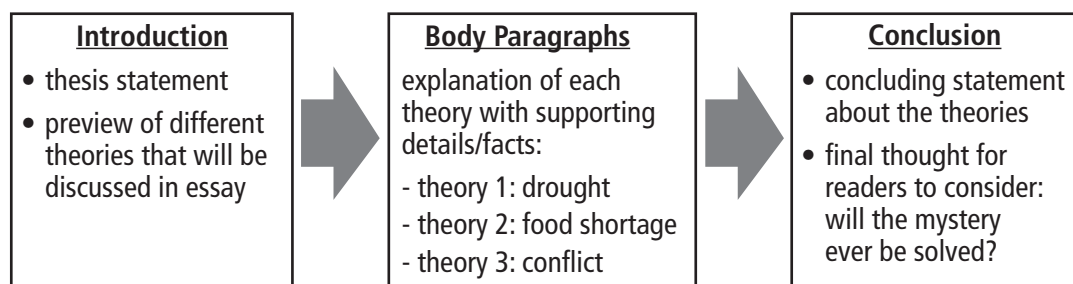
A **thesis statement** is a sentence in which you state your central idea, or the main point you will make in your writing. All other ideas in your supporting paragraphs should relate to the thesis statement. Here’s an example of a well-written thesis statement.

Although no one knows exactly why the Pueblo people abandoned the Mesa Verde region, scientists have developed several theories to explain possible reasons for the migration.

Notice how this thesis statement includes a clear position that addresses the focus of the prompt. Based on this statement, readers will know what ideas and information will be included in the rest of the essay.

Organize Your Ideas

Once you have written your thesis statement, it's time to start planning your response. If you are writing a short informative paragraph, your response should include your thesis statement and supporting details. For a longer informative text, you should have a strong introduction, supporting body paragraphs, and a conclusion. A graphic organizer, such as a flowchart, can help you organize your ideas.



Choose Information to Support Your Thesis

When you use a source, or multiple sources, to write an informational or explanatory text, choose the most **relevant**, or appropriate, information to support your thesis. Look at the three pieces of information below. Which is the most relevant fact that addresses the theories about why the Puebloans abandoned the Mesa Verde region?

- Mesa Verde became a national park in 1906.
- Some scientists use tree-ring dating to show evidence of a severe drought.
- The largest cliff dwelling in the park is called Cliff Palace.

You may revisit the source texts as much as you need to while you write. However, any evidence from the sources that you include in your writing should also be **credible**, or reliable. Look out for any possible bias, faulty reasoning, or inaccurate information.

Keep Your Audience in Mind

Whenever you write, you should use a style that is appropriate for your audience and purpose. For an informational or explanatory text, you should use a **formal style** that follows proper English. This means you should avoid the use of slang words or phrases.

Because your purpose is to inform, your audience may or may not be familiar with the topic you are writing about. Be sure to use clear, precise language to present your facts in a way your readers can understand. Define **domain-specific vocabulary** whenever you can, and carefully explain concepts your audience may not have encountered before. In addition, use transition words, such as *however*, *for example*, or *in contrast*, to help readers understand how your ideas relate to each other.

Use Formatting and Graphics

Often in informational and explanatory texts, it is helpful to include formatting, such as **headings**, and **graphics**, such as photos, charts, or diagrams. When appropriate, use **subheads** to break up your writing into smaller sections. Subheads can show how the main topic can be broken down into subtopics, guiding readers through the text. Likewise, using graphics can help you expand or clarify the information you write about, allowing readers to visualize and better understand the concepts you discuss.

Informative Writing Checklist

After you have finished writing, reread your work to ensure that it is clear and well-organized. Use the following checklist to guide your revision.

- Does my response answer all parts of the prompt or fully address the topic I have chosen?
- Is my thesis statement clear?
- Do I use enough relevant evidence from sources to support my thesis statement?
- Do I include a conclusion that follows from and supports my thesis statement and evidence?
- Do I use precise language and a formal style?
- Is my writing free of grammar and mechanics errors?

Language Spotlight • Active and Passive Language

In **active voice**, the subject performs the action. In **passive voice**, the action is performed on the subject. In most cases, it is better to write in active voice. However, passive voice may be used when the subject is unknown, not important, or when the writer does not want to reveal the subject.

active voice: In 1888, two ranchers rediscovered the cliff dwellings.

passive voice: In 1888, the cliff dwellings were rediscovered by two ranchers.

Which sentence is clearer? Why?

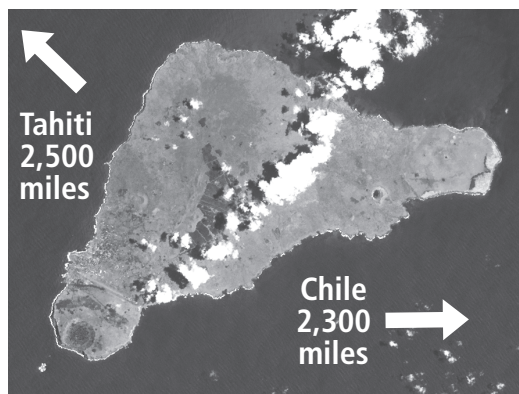
Read the passage.

Easter Island

Why do so many tourists flock to Easter Island every year? Easter Island, known as Rapa Nui to its inhabitants, is a small, isolated island in the South Pacific Ocean. It has beautiful landscapes and an intriguing history. Friendly Rapanuis are happy to show off their island.

Easter Island is one of the youngest inhabited territories on Earth. It is only about sixty-three square miles, a little larger than Washington, D.C. The island's nearest population center, Chile, is more than 2,300 miles to the east. Tahiti, another population center, is about 2,500 miles to the northwest. That is about the distance between San Francisco and New York. Easter Island's tropical climate, blue waters, cave paintings, and craters are major attractions.

Most historians agree that Polynesian seafarers first inhabited the island. But opposing theories exist. Thor Heyerdahl, an anthropologist and explorer from Norway, thought that the first inhabitants were from Peru. He based his theory on the similarity between Rapanui and Incan stonework. Furthermore, he found many cultural similarities between the Rapa Nui and South American Indian cultures. These included carved writing on wood tablets. Ancient Polynesians had no such writing. In addition, Heyerdahl built a balsa-wood raft, the *Kon Tiki*, based on a Peruvian design. He then sailed from South America to Easter Island to prove that it could be done. Others think that Easter Island is the remnant of a lost continent. One wacky theory even suggests that the island was formed by extraterrestrial intervention.



Easter Island, known as Rapa Nui, is an isolated island in the South Pacific Ocean, thousands of miles away from the nearest population center.

Based on Heyerdahl’s findings, most scientists agree that Rapa Nui was first inhabited around 400 CE. More recently, however, scientists have used radiocarbon dating to suggest that the island was not inhabited until 700–800 CE. Also using radiocarbon dating, others think the island was first inhabited as recently as 1200 CE.

The inhabitants’ ancestry and the settlement date are still a mystery, but there is no doubt that the island once supported an advanced civilization. This included tattooing and petroglyphs¹. And then, of course, there are the moai. The moai are giant monoliths² carved into human forms. They are the main attraction on Easter Island.

Even though Easter Island is small and remote, its beautiful land features and mysterious past attract many visitors. A visit to Easter Island is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

¹ **petroglyph:** a rock carving

² **monolith:** a statue carved out of one solid piece of rock

Answer the following questions.

- 1** According to the information in the passage, why is the origin of Easter Island’s first inhabitants and the date of the island’s settlement still in question?

Write your answer on the lines provided.

Hint Explain the conflicting evidence historians have discovered. Be sure to address their questions about both the inhabitants and the settlement date.

- 2 Which word could be substituted for wacky to maintain the formal style of the passage?
- A. weird
 - B. off-the-wall
 - C. unusual
 - D. awesome

Hint Remember that when you write with a formal style, you should avoid the use of slang words and phrases. Choose the word above that is most appropriate for academic writing.

- 3 Below are three claims that one could make based on the passage “Easter Island.”

Claims	Easter Island is a small, isolated island in the Pacific Ocean with an intriguing history.
	Easter Island was first settled by Polynesian seafarers in 400 CE.
	A visit to Easter Island is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Part A

Circle the claim above that is supported by the evidence in passage.

Part B

Underline two facts in the passage that **best** support the claim you circled in Part A.

Hint Part A asks you to identify the main claim of the passage. Think about what most details in the passage are about. Part B asks you to identify details that support this claim.

- 4 How does the map support the details in the passage “Easter Island”?
- A. It shows how tall the human forms are.
 - B. It shows how old the human forms are.
 - C. It shows when the human forms were erected.
 - D. It shows how isolated the island is from other land.

Hint What geographical information from the text does the map illustrate?

Use the Reading Guide to help you understand the passage.

Reading Guide

What are the three most important mysteries that are addressed in this passage?

How have scientists tried to solve the mysteries over the years?

If you had to use this passage as a source for writing an informative text, what facts would be most important?

The Mysteries of Easter Island

What draws people to visit a small, isolated island in the South Pacific Ocean that is thousands of miles away from any population center? The mysterious stone statues that dot Easter Island have piqued the curiosity of travelers for centuries, ever since Europeans first set foot on the island in 1722. Explorers wanted to know how and why the statues were carved. More important, they wanted to know how these huge monoliths were moved over rough terrain from the quarry where they were carved to their final destinations. Scientists have been trying to solve the mysteries of Easter Island for years and have come up with conflicting theories.

The mysterious stone statues, known as moai, vary greatly in size. The smallest ones are no more than six feet in height. However, the largest one found to date is thirty-two feet in height and weighs in at a whopping eighty tons. The statues are carved with humanlike features with large heads sitting atop a torso and thighs. Facial features include eyes, pursed lips, and ears. Some of the ears are short, while others are long. No one knows for sure why the moai were carved this way. But it is believed that the features reflect the early ethnic groups, known as Short Ears and Long Ears.

Another mystery surrounding the statues is how they were carved by people who had no metal tools. Recently archaeologists have unearthed about 500 stone tools. The early inhabitants probably used big, heavy picks to carve out the head and body and finer obsidian and basalt tools to sketch in the facial features and finer details. Archaeologists also found a petroglyph of a Polynesian-style canoe under one of the heads. According to Jo Anne Van Tilburg, director of the Easter Island Statue Project, the petroglyph indicates that it “was meant to identify the statue [as belonging] to a family group or subgroup, either carvers of the family unit or the carvers [they] came from.” In contrast, other theories propose that the statues were made to honor ancestors, chiefs, and other important community figures. Still others theorize that the statues were erected as guardians to protect the people of the island.

Reading Guide

Look for transition words that help connect ideas.

What kind of language does the author use? Is the style formal or informal?

Study the photograph and the caption. What does it contribute to the passage?

Perhaps the biggest mystery about the moai of Easter Island is how these gigantic statues were moved without the use of wheels, cranes, or even work animals. There are conflicting theories about how this was done. Most of the statues were carved at Rano Raraku, a huge quarry inside one of the three extinct volcanoes that form the island. Then, they were moved to various locations on the island, some of them more than eleven miles away. When asked how the statues were moved, native Rapanuis say, “They walked.” In 1986 Norwegian explorer-anthropologist Thor Heyerdahl and Czech engineer Pavel Pavel tried to prove this theory. Working with seventeen helpers, the men tried to move a thirteen-foot, nine-ton moai forward in an upright, “walking” position with twisting motions. In the process, they damaged the moai’s base and had to stop the experiment.

One commonly held belief about how the statues were moved is that they were placed on wooden sleds and rolled over logs. This theory received much support after 1987 when U.S. archaeologist Charles Love and a team of twenty-five workers used a wooden sledge to move a nine-ton, thirteen-foot model over log rollers. Doing so, they moved the model 148 feet in two minutes. Many historians think this practice contributed to the deforestation of the island and to the eventual ruin of its ecosystem.



Almost 900 moai, ranging in size from six feet to thirty-two feet, dot the landscape of Easter Island.

Reading Guide

Does the author come across as a knowledgeable source? Why?

Notice how the conclusion summarizes the information the author has presented.

In 2011, Terry Hunt of the University of Hawaii and Carl Lipo of California State University, Long Beach again tried to prove that the statues “walked.” They started by building a mold of an average moai. It was ten feet tall and weighed about five tons. Working with native Rapanui archaeologist Sergio Rapu and eighteen helpers, they tied ropes around the statue. After much trial and error, they got the statue upright and made it “walk.” Chanting “Heave-ho,” the workers twisted the ropes back and forth in a rocking motion. Eventually, they were able to move the statue more than one hundred yards in just forty minutes. The scientists say that they could move any size moai with the same technique because the statues were engineered to walk.

The mysteries of Easter Island have fascinated scientists and explorers for hundreds of years, and conflicting theories have emerged to solve them. Will modern technologies be able to determine the ancestry of the original inhabitants, how the moai were carved, and how they were moved from the quarry?

Answer the following questions.

- 1 What is the author’s main idea in this passage?
 - A. The Rapanui developed an advanced civilization with well-engineered statues to prove it.
 - B. There are conflicting theories about how the moai were carved and how they were moved.
 - C. Cutting down trees on which to roll the moai caused deforestation and eventually led to the ruin of the island’s ecosystem.
 - D. It is possible to move giant statues without the use of wheels, cranes, or work animals.

- 2 Read the names in the box below of some scientists who have theories about the moai. Then, follow the directions below.

Carl Lipo and Terry Hunt Charles Love Jo Anne Van Tilburg

Read the theories in the first column of the chart. Write the name of scientist from the box above next to his or her theory.

A. The moai were placed on wood sledges and rolled across logs to their final destinations.	
B. The petroglyphs on the moai indicate that the statues were carved by different family groups.	
C. The moai could be made to walk by attaching ropes and rocking the statue back and forth.	

- 3 Read these sentences from the passage.

The mysterious stone statues, known as moai, vary greatly in size. The smallest ones are no more than six feet in height. However, the largest one found to date is thirty-two feet in height and weighs in at a whopping eighty tons.

Identify a word that does not belong in a text written in the formal style. Explain why this word seems out of place in this passage, and suggest a word that might fit in better.

- 6 Imagine that you are a member of the Easter Island tourist board. Your job is to prepare a brochure for new visitors to your island. Write an informative essay that provides your audience with background on the island’s history. It should also note some places of interest and describe what visitors can expect to see at each site. Use facts from “Easter Island” and “The Mysteries of Easter Island” to support your ideas.

You may plan your informative essay in the space below. Write your essay on the following pages.

Plan

