

Rubric Category	Comprehensive Understanding
Grade/Score	Grades 6-12 / Score 3
Rubric Category	Development
Grade/Score	Grades 6-12 / Scores 2 and 3
CCSS Writing Standards	W1, W1b, W1c
Argument Type	All arguments

Constructing Compelling Explanations

Students will practice coordinating textual evidence with explanations.

Understanding the Expectations

You probably already know that if you're going to prove your claim or thesis, you've got to use evidence from the text. However, evidence alone isn't enough to make the case to your reader—you need to pair your evidence with compelling explanations.

There are varied options involving how best to craft meaningful and compelling explanations of your evidence. The starting point might best be described in volleyball lingo as “bump, set, and spike”—as in, first you “bump” the ball to a teammate, then the teammate “sets” the ball up for a good spike, and finally someone “spikes” the ball over the net for a point. In writing, your evidence is the ball, and you have to set it up carefully to make your point.

1. First, you “bump” the quotation or textual evidence by establishing a context for it.
2. You then “set” the textual evidence into the writing through paraphrase, direct quotation, or embedded quotation.
3. The final step, and the focus of this lesson, is to “spike” the point home, or craft a compelling explanation that connects your textual evidence back to your claim in a way that dilates meaning and strengthens your argument.

What does this look like?

As you read this excerpt from the article “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” by psychology professor Jean Twenge, consider how she uses and explains her evidence. She is making the argument that smartphone use is defining a generation that will feel the effects into adulthood:

First, Twenge “bumps” the evidence she is about to provide by helping prepare the reader for it. She anticipates what they are thinking and provides information about the survey she’ll reference.

You might expect that teens spend so much time in these new spaces because it makes them happy, but most data suggest that it does not. The Monitoring the Future survey...asks teens how happy they are and also how much of their leisure time

they spend on various activities, including nonscreen activities such as in-person social interaction and exercise, and, in recent years, screen activities such as using social media, texting, and browsing the web. The results could not

Next, the author “sets” the evidence up, listing the data that shows how much less happy teens are when they spend more time on social media and less time with friends.

be clearer: Teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time than average on nonscreen activities are more likely to be happy.

There’s not a single exception. All screen activities are linked to less happiness, and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness. Eighth-graders who spend 10 or more hours a week on social media are 56 percent more likely to say they’re unhappy than those who devote less time to social media. [...] The opposite is true of in-person interactions. Those who spend an



above-average amount of time with their friends in person are 20 percent less likely to say they're unhappy than those who hang out for a below-average amount of time.

If you were going to give advice for a happy adolescence based on this survey, it would be straightforward: Put down the phone, turn off the laptop, and do something—anything—that does not involve a screen.

Finally, Twenge “spikes” the evidence and drives her point home: if teenagers want to be happy, they should try to spend less time in front of a screen.

It is worth noting what this author does to make this evidence interesting and compelling for the reader: rather than just listing facts about smartphone use, she sets up a clear idea, uses the evidence to show a pattern of cause and effect, and then helps the reader focus on the larger issue.

Trying it Out

Select an excerpt of textual evidence that you have used or plan to use in your writing. If you are revising a draft, choose one you think you could set up more clearly for the reader.

1. First, isolate the most important idea in your textual evidence. How does it connect with your claim? Does it directly prove your main point? Does it support an argument you're making for a sub-claim? Dig a little deeper: What is the nature of that connection? Is it cause and effect? Does it define something, classify something, exclude something? Does it conjure a comparison or a contrast?
2. After you have thought about how it connects, craft a sentence where you give specific context and apply the textual evidence to your argument. Make sure you are pleased with your “bump” and “set” (i.e. how you lead into the evidence and set it into your writing).
3. “Spike” your evidence home by crafting an explanation that uses a strong critical connection you found.

For example, if you were using the article above on smartphones and the iGen,



and you wished to emphasize how studies show that screen time negatively affects the mental health of teens, you might write something like this:

The trend toward teen depression is well supported by the long-running Monitoring the Future survey, which shows, "There's not a single exception. All screen activities are linked to less happiness, and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness." Clearly, in terms of teen happiness, smartphones have done more harm than good.

If possible, share your work with a partner or in a class discussion. Give and receive feedback. Edit your work as appropriate.

Writing it Up

Review your draft focusing on its use of evidence with compelling explanations. If you are in the earlier stages of work, adjust your draft so far to include the bump, set, spike approach to offering effective explanations of evidence. As you continue to draft, be aware of using this approach in writing further explanations.

If you are in the later stages of writing, edit to include clearer context for your evidence and check for follow up explanations to "spike" home your major points.