Building Text Sets

(excerpted and developed by Shirlee Dufort, from Gail Buffalo’s ALST Presentation March 26, 2015, at Elmira College)
How to build your own text set

• A text set can be based on the genre or a theme, but it includes a variety of different kinds of texts, so it’s basically a ready-made research package.

• This is a set of sources that students can use to write on a topic.
• Text sets are a logical and efficient way to help students to be able to write to a topic and have a variety of sources to choose from, without having to use their time to do original research and find the materials themselves.
• The real labor is in finding usable, robust texts that mimic what students are going to see on the test. Building a text set will allow you to scaffold student writing and make it easier to produce prompts.
• When you’re building a text set for test prep, **focus on enduring issues.**

For ideas, you can go to:

• The *EngageNY* website
• procon.org
• PBS’s *Frontline.*
The previously mentioned sources are all good sources for enduring issues like:

- Poverty welfare reform
- Environmental issues
- Issues of scale, such as corporate agriculture versus local agriculture
- Minimum wage issues
• In creating a text set, you can shop from a variety of sources that include op-eds and blogs.

• To alleviate printing costs and consider copyright constraints, you can put links on a Blackboard site and keep the materials online.

• Institutions often have subscriptions to the New York Times or the Congressional Digest, and both can be useful.
• You can also look at sources that are cited on the practice tests
• Once you’ve decided on an enduring issue, you can use it as a keyword and search Google, which will also often provide images and graphs.
• You can look for:
  • 5-6 passages and 2-3 graphics.
  • 400-600 words pro & 400-600 words con

Both passages should be more argumentative than persuasive, so you’re looking for logic, numbers, and reasoning.
• Google the readability score as a diagnostic, gradually increasing the level of challenge.

• Delete any non-essential words or vocabulary, so the reading passages stay at 400-600 words each.

• Ask a student to read the two passages and ask for feedback about the readability.
• When students take the practice test, suggest that they not submit their writing, since they receive no feedback.

• Instead, they could submit their writing to a professor or a Writing Center tutor to get feedback.

• Students should time themselves in accordance with the ALST recommendations.

• Some educators have found that if students are writing at a 3 level in practice, they’re likely to write well enough to pass the test.
Another tool to use with students who will take the ALST is a readiness survey, asking them, on a scale of 1-5:

- How comfortable are you with the typing demands of the test?
- Can you comfortably answer at least 50% of the multiple choice questions correctly?
- How comfortable are you with responding to the essays within the time constraints?

That way, students focus on their readiness rather than the teacher being the authority over their readiness.
• Gail Buffalo created a text set, for an imaginary Master’s degree seminar class, about the new proposed regulations in teacher education, the pros and cons and the arguments.

• An example of a text set that addresses this issue is in the Dropbox on the cIcu website. There is the kind of high-level text complexity that will provide an opportunity for students to engage in writing sources competencies.
• Gail said that she Googled a variety of terms, like: “federal regulations for teacher education” and “public comment period for regulations on teacher education.”

• She has found that “pro-con” and “source + criticism” are good ways to search.
• Combing sites for outside links is useful

• If you find biased texts, that are more opinion and persuasion, you can use them as examples for how they differ from argumentation.