Grade 4 – Informational Writing Work Sample: Approaching

Task: Your class is studying about different ecosystems and animal habitats. You are given three sources about various animals and the habitats they live within.

Read the sources carefully to **write an informational article** on animals and their habitats. Using more than one source, develop a main idea about animals and their surroundings. Choose the most important information from the sources to support your main idea.

Scores, Justification of Student Evidence, and Suggested Areas of Student Improvement

Ideas and Content: 4

The paper demonstrates an adequate understanding of the task and includes clear main ideas supported by accurate details from multiple sources. The writer describes how animals survive in different environments—cold regions, deserts, and oceans—with examples that align with the provided texts. However, ideas are mostly listed rather than explained, limiting depth and synthesis.

Evidence from Student Work: Ideas and Content	Student Recommendations for Improvement: Ideas and Content
✓ **Clear Main Idea:** ○ The introduction ("Animals are very special creatures... all they need is a little help from nature") establishes the main purpose of explaining how animals survive in extreme environments.	➢ **Refine the Main Idea:** ○ Begin with a stronger focus, such as: "Animals adapt to survive in extreme environments through their bodies and behaviors."
✓ **Accurate Use of Source Details:** ○ Mentions of icefish having a special protein, penguins huddling for warmth, and polar bears digging dens accurately reflect *Source #1*. The reference to elf owls living in cactus plants and desert animals staying underground at night also align with the text evidence.	➢ **Connect Examples:** ○ Use linking sentences to show relationships between environments: "While penguins use group warmth, desert animals stay cool by hiding underground."
✓ **Limited Elaboration:** ○ Details are factual but mostly listed: "Ice Fish have a special protein… Penguins have blubber… Whales flee from cold water." The writing rarely explains why these traits help survival. This limits the sophistication of the ideas.	➢ **Deepen Explanations:** ○ After each fact, add a sentence explaining how it helps animals survive. For example: "Icefish have a protein that keeps their blood from freezing, allowing them to live in icy water."
✓ **Some Redundancy and Minor Inaccuracy:** ○ Occasional repetition ("warm and toasty") and broad generalizations ("crabs live in the ocean too") weaken precision. The ideas would benefit from a clearer link back to the main idea.	➢ **Add a Closing Insight:** ○ End with a sentence that sums up what these examples show about how nature helps animals survive.

Organization: 4

The paper demonstrates adequate organization and is generally easy to follow. Information is grouped by environment (cold regions, deserts, and the ocean), and the sequence makes logical sense. The introduction identifies the topic, and the conclusion provides closure, though transitions between sections are basic and repetitive.

Evidence from Student Work: Organization	Student Recommendations for Improvement: Organization
✓ **Clear Structure:** ○ The writer uses a consistent pattern—each paragraph focuses on a different environment. The sequence from cold → hot → ocean gives the piece logical flow and supports understanding.	➢ **Use Paragraph Hooks:** ○ End each paragraph with a line that leads into the next (e.g., "While penguins stay warm, desert animals face a completely different challenge — heat.")
✓ **Introduction and Conclusion Present:** ○ The opening paragraph introduces the topic of animal survival in different environments. The conclusion ("Now you should understand how special animals are...") ties back to the main idea and signals an ending, though it mostly restates earlier points without deeper reflection.	➢ **Expand the Conclusion:** ○ Summarize how all examples connect to the main idea instead of just restating examples.
✓ **Basic Transitions:** ○ Transitions such as "But," "Then," and "Deserts are a different story" show some attempt at linking ideas, but they are repetitive and don't show clear relationships between sections (e.g., comparison or contrast).	➢ **Use Transition Phrases for Connection:** ○ Replace basic transitions with precise ones such as "In contrast," "Similarly," or "Another way animals adapt…" to show relationships between ideas.
✓ **Paragraph Cohesion:** ○ Each paragraph sticks to its topic but could use stronger linking sentences and clearer topic sentences to guide readers through the shift in environments.	➢ **Add Stronger Topic Sentences:** ○ Begin each paragraph with a clear focus statement (e.g., "Many animals have special ways to survive freezing temperatures").

Voice: 4

The writing shows the writer's genuine interest in animals and presents information in an engaging, conversational tone. While enthusiasm is clear, the voice sometimes becomes too casual or repetitive, reducing the sense of authority expected in informational writing.

Evidence from Student Work: Voice	Student Recommendations for Improvement: Voice
✓ **Engaging Tone:** ○ The introduction ("Animals are very special creatures…") immediately shows enthusiasm for the topic. Expressions such as "warm and toasty" and "they still have some more tricks up their blubber and fat" create energy and personality, keeping the reader interested.	➢ **Adopt an Expert Tone:** ○ Write as if teaching readers about animals' survival methods—using confident, clear statements instead of conversational fillers.
✓ **Sincere Interest:** ○ The writer's excitement about animal survival comes through consistently, suggesting personal curiosity about the topic and effort to connect with readers.	➢ **Add Variety in Voice:** ○ Use curiosity or wonder ("How do animals survive where humans cannot?") to engage readers while maintaining an informational tone.
✓ **Occasional Over-Casual Style:** ○ Informal language ("penguin buddys," "tricks up their blubber") adds liveliness but shifts tone away from informational purpose. A more formal, confident voice would strengthen credibility.	➢ **Balance Energy with Precision:** ○ Keep lively phrases but revise overly casual expressions into more academic ones (e.g., "special tricks" → "unique behaviors that help them survive").

Evidence from Student Work: Voice	Student Recommendations for Improvement: Voice
✓ **Limited Audience Awareness:** ○ While friendly and readable, the piece lacks direct signals to the audience's needs for clarity and accuracy (e.g., defining terms like *blubber* or *adaptation*).	➢ **Clarify for Readers:** ○ When using scientific ideas, briefly explain or define them so the tone feels knowledgeable as well as friendly.

Word Choice: 4

The writing uses a variety of words that generally communicate meaning clearly. The vocabulary shows understanding of the topic and includes some precise and content-specific terms (e.g., *protein, blubber, cactus*). However, some repetition and overuse of everyday language limit sophistication.

Evidence from Student Work: Word Choice	Student Recommendations for Improvement: Word Choice
✓ **Appropriate Content Vocabulary:** ○ The paper uses accurate scientific words related to animal survival such as *protein*, *fat*, *blubber*, and *cactus*. These choices show that the writer drew vocabulary directly from the sources.	➢ **Add More Domain Vocabulary:** ○ Introduce terms from the sources such as *habitat, environment, ecosystem,* or *adaptation* to sound more expert.
✓ **Variety and Clarity:** ○ Most words clearly express ideas. Phrases like "cold freezing place," "burning hot deserts," and "deep and dark ocean" demonstrate an attempt to use vivid language for contrast among habitats.	➢ **Strengthen Imagery Purposefully:** ○ Keep some descriptive phrases but make sure they serve the informational goal rather than sounding playful.
✓ **Some Repetition and Redundancy:** ○ Frequent repetition of words such as *warm*, *cold*, and *toasty* limits variety. The word "different" appears multiple times without precise alternatives, and phrases like "a big group hug with a few other penguin buddys" could be revised for accuracy and tone.	➢ **Use Variety to Avoid Repetition:** ○ Find synonyms for repeated words (e.g., "freezing," "icy," "frigid," "polar" for *cold*).
✓ **Limited Precision:** ○ Some general or conversational word choices ("tricks up their blubber and fat," "really tough place to live in") weaken the clarity expected in an informational piece. More exact language could strengthen reader understanding.	➢ **Replace Everyday Words with Exact Terms:** ○ Instead of "tricks," use "adaptations" or "behaviors." Replace "toasty" with "warm and protected."

Sentence Fluency: 3

The writing shows some sentence variety and reads smoothly in places, but several sentences are long, run together, or begin the same way. Occasional choppy or repetitive phrasing interrupts flow and makes the piece harder to read aloud naturally.

Evidence from Student Work: Sentence Fluency	Student Recommendations for Improvement: Sentence Fluency
✓ **Some Sentence Variety:** ○ The writer includes a mix of short and long sentences, such as: "Ice Fish have a special protein in their bodies which keeps them from freezing and keeps ice crystals from forming in their bodies." This shows developing control over complex sentence structure.	➢ **Use Transitional Clauses:** ○ Add linking phrases (e.g., "Because they live in extreme cold…" or "Unlike desert animals…") to improve sentence variety and logical flow.
✓ **Repetitive Beginnings:** ○ Many sentences start with similar words—often "But," "They," or "Animals." For example, "But Polar Bears, Penguins, and Whales have a diffrent survival tactic" and "But the ocean is the exact opposite of the desert." This repetition makes the rhythm predictable.	➢ **Vary Sentence Beginnings:** ○ Start with prepositional phrases, transition words, or descriptive openers (e.g., "In the icy waters of Antarctica, icefish survive by…").
✓ **Run-On and Overloaded Sentences:** ○ Some sentences string multiple ideas together without proper breaks or transitions: "For us, humans, to survive in burning hot deserts, and freezing cold snow, and the deep and dark ocean, it would be almost impossible without tools." These need punctuation or division for clarity.	➢ **Break Up Long Sentences:** ○ Divide multi-idea sentences into two or more to improve clarity and flow.
✓ **Readable but Uneven Flow:** ○ While the piece can be followed when read aloud, pacing varies. The rhythm improves when shorter sentences are used intentionally but falters during lists or when conjunctions pile up.	➢ **Read Aloud for Sound:** ○ Practice reading the draft aloud to find where sentences sound awkward or drag; adjust punctuation or combine short sentences for rhythm.

Conventions: 3

The paper shows progress toward grade-level control of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Sentences are mostly complete, and capitalization is generally correct. However, frequent spelling errors, inconsistent punctuation, and occasional run-ons distract the reader and require noticeable editing.

Evidence from Student Work: Conventions	Student Recommendations for Improvement: Conventions
✓ **Spelling Errors:** ○ Several high-frequency or easily checked words are misspelled: *diffrent, multipule, buddys, enviorment, schorching.* These errors occur often enough to draw attention and reduce polish.	➢ **Fix Spelling and Word Endings:** ○ Use a dictionary or spell-check to correct errors like *diffrent* → *different*, *multipule* → *multiple*, *enviorment* → *environment.*
✓ **Punctuation and Sentence Boundaries:** ○ Most sentences end correctly, but some are overly long or joined with commas or conjunctions instead of proper punctuation: ○ Example: "For us, humans, to survive in burning hot deserts, and freezing cold snow, and the deep and dark ocean, it would be almost impossible without tools." This could be revised into shorter, clearer sentences.	➢ **Check Sentence Endings:** ○ Read each sentence aloud to hear where natural pauses occur, then insert periods accordingly.

Evidence from Student Work: Conventions	Student Recommendations for Improvement: Conventions
✓ **Capitalization and Grammar:** ○ Capitalization is correct for sentence beginnings and proper nouns. Grammar is generally sound, though plural and possessive forms are inconsistent (*penguin buddys → penguin buddies*).	➢ **Use Commas Purposefully:** ○ Review comma rules for items in a series and after introductory phrases.
✓ **Editing Need:** ○ Errors do not make the writing unreadable but require multiple corrections for a final draft.	➢ **Proofread in Steps:** ○ First check for spelling, then punctuation, then grammar, using colored pencils to mark each type of correction.

Use of Sources: 4

The writer uses information accurately from multiple sources, selecting relevant facts to explain how animals survive in different environments. While the paper does not include formal citations or quotations, details are clearly drawn from at least two texts and paraphrased in the writer's own words.

Evidence from Student Work: Use of Sources	Student Recommendations for Improvement: Use of Sources
✓ **Multiple Sources Used:** ○ Information about icefish antifreeze proteins, penguins huddling, polar bears' dens, desert animals' nocturnal behavior, and the elf owl's cactus home all reflect content from *Source #1: It's a Cold (Hot, Dry, Dark) Cruel World!* and *Source #2: Animal Architects.*	➢ **Add Source Attribution:** ○ Use phrases like "In one article," "The author explains," or "According to the text…" to clarify where information came from.
✓ **Accurate Paraphrasing:** ○ Facts are restated in the student's own words rather than copied directly from the texts. For example, "Ice Fish have a special protein in their bodies which keeps them from freezing" captures the idea of natural antifreeze accurately.	➢ **Explain the Connection Between Details:** ○ After presenting facts from multiple sources, add linking sentences that explain how those facts fit together.
✓ **No Formal Citation or Integration:** ○ The writer does not identify which source each detail came from or include a list of sources. While not expected in full academic form at this grade level, some signal phrases ("According to one article…" or "The text explains…") would strengthen attribution.	➢ **Include a Simple Source List:** ○ Add a short list at the end with article titles to meet grade-level expectations for source acknowledgement.
✓ **Coverage Across Texts:** ○ The essay integrates examples from at least two sources but misses opportunities to connect information conceptually (e.g., comparing how animals in different environments use physical vs. behavioral adaptations).	➢ **Use a Third Source Connection:** ○ Bring in at least one idea from *Don't Step in that Ecosystem!* to show how animals depend on other living things as part of survival.

Suggestions for Teaching Strategies to Support the Student Sample:

The following contain suggestions for teaching strategies and do not encompass a complete list of possible strategies.

Ideas and Content:

Elaboration Ladder Practice:

- Have students take one example (e.g., penguins huddling) and add "how" and "why" sentences beneath it. This teaches elaboration through cause-and-effect reasoning.

Main Idea and Supporting Detail Sort:

- Provide a list of mixed facts from the sources and have students match each to one of three main categories: *Cold Environments, Deserts, or Oceans.* This reinforces grouping information to support a clear focus.

Source Integration Mini-Lesson:

- Model how to pull details from more than one source to support one main idea. For instance, compare how animals in both deserts and the Arctic use behavioral adaptations to survive temperature extremes.

Organization:

Paragraph Planning Frames:

- Teach students to plan each paragraph using a frame: *Topic Sentence → Evidence from Source → Explanation → Link to Main Idea*. Model how this structure creates logical flow and prevents list-like writing.

Transition Signal Sort:

- Provide transition cards (e.g., *first, next, in contrast, for example, as a result*) and have students categorize them by function (time order, comparison, cause/effect). Then apply them to a short draft for smoother movement between ideas.

Mentor Text Dissection:

- Show an exemplar informational article on animal adaptations. Have students highlight how the author organizes by topic, uses transitions, and creates a concluding section that connects all ideas.

Voice:

Tone Switch Practice:

- Give students a lively but informal paragraph and have them rewrite it in a more academic, factual tone—retaining enthusiasm but removing slang and exaggeration. Discuss how tone changes the reader's perception of expertise.

"Expert to Friend" Mini-Lesson:

- Model how to address the audience both as an expert (using precise vocabulary) and as a friend (using an inviting tone). Students then revise their drafts to balance both roles.

Voice Check Stations:

- Set up peer-review stations where partners highlight one sentence that sounds strong and one that sounds too casual. Students practice revising for tone consistency and audience awareness.

Suggestions for Teaching Strategies to Support the Student Sample:

The following contain suggestions for teaching strategies and do not encompass a complete list of possible strategies.

Word Choice:

Precision Vocabulary Wall:

- Create a class word wall of strong informational terms (e.g., *adaptation, environment, species, survive, habitat*). Have students replace weaker or repeated words in their drafts with terms from the wall.

"Find a Better Word" Revision Routine:

- Model using a thesaurus or content glossary to find stronger replacements for repeated or vague words. Students highlight one repeated word and replace it with two precise alternatives.

Mentor Text Word Hunt:

- Provide a model informational passage and have students underline content-specific vocabulary. Discuss why those word choices make the writing sound knowledgeable, then apply the same strategy to their own work.

Sentence Fluency:

Sentence Pattern Sorting:

- Provide strips of student sentences and have groups label them as *simple, compound, or complex*. Students then revise one example of each to increase variety.

Oral Reading and Rhythm Check:

- Have students read their paragraphs aloud to partners, listening for places where they stumble or lose rhythm. Mark those spots for revision.

Sentence Combining Practice:

- Use two or three short, related sentences (e.g., "Penguins huddle together. They stay warm. They survive the cold.") and model combining them into a single fluent sentence ("Penguins huddle together to stay warm and survive the cold.").

Conventions:

Targeted Editing Workshops:

- Provide short daily editing tasks using excerpts from student writing. Focus one mini-lesson each on spelling patterns, punctuation, or capitalization.

Peer Proofreading Checklists:

- Have partners read each other's drafts using a checklist for sentence endings, commas, and capitalization. Students highlight one example of a correct usage and one that needs revision.

Spelling Pattern Sorts:

- Collect common errors from class drafts and sort them by pattern (e.g., -ent/-ant endings, double consonants, vowel teams). Students practice correcting and applying each pattern in context.

Use of Sources:

Source Integration Modeling:

- Model how to introduce facts with simple signal phrases ("One source explains that…"). Students practice adding these to their own sentences.

Color-Coded Source Mapping:

- Have students highlight notes from each source in a different color, then check their draft to ensure information from at least two sources appears.

Paraphrasing Relay:

- Read a short paragraph from a source aloud and have students restate it in their own words with one key fact changed into a synonym or simpler explanation. This helps them internalize source information without copying.