Introduction Paragraph
7ʰ/8ʰ grade expectation: 150+ words (includes the thesis)

1. Before you jump into your position on a topic, you need to introduce it to your readers. Begin with the big picture:
    *   Explain the kinds of issues that are involved in the topic.
    *   Explain terms that readers will need to know.

Example
Template: *When we look at _____(name your topic)_____, it is important to consider the many factors involved. One of these factors is_____(related aspect 1)_____. (Write a couple sentences explaining that factor.) Another factor is _____(related aspect 2)_____. (Write a couple sentences explaining that factor. Continue to name and explain as many other important aspects as are needed, e.g., "The third factor is . . . The fourth factor is . . .")*

Example: *When we look at how we deal with drugs in the U.S., it is important to consider the many factors involved. One of these factors is going to "war" against the drugs. This means that certain drugs are illegal, and that people are punished if they are caught making, selling, or possessing these drugs. This war has been successful in catching people, but it hasn't been as successful stopping the flow of drugs and drug users. Another factor is mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenses. Mandatory minimum sentencing forces judges to give drug offenders a minimum number of years in prison without considering their individual circumstances. A third factor in this discussion is the way that our prison system is set up: to punish drug offenders. Some countries have a similar focus, but other countries' prisons are set up to rehabilitate drug offenders, not just punish them.*

2. Next, discuss the problem you are going to focus on:
    *   What is the problem?
    *   Why is it a problem?
    *   How long has it been going on?

Example
Template: *The problem that we should address now is ___(focus problem)___. (Write a couple sentences explaining the problem by answering the questions in the bullet points above.)*

Example: *The problem that we should address now is mandatory minimum sentencing. This is a problem because there are so many people involved in making, selling, and using drugs. The fact is, we are going to continue catching offenders. However, not all offenders are in the same circumstances, and so judges need the power to do their jobs—to make judgment calls. Mandatory minimum sentences have been in place for many years, but we need to make change.*

Thesis

3. In a clear sentence, state your position and the arguments (reasons) why we should support your position.

Example
Template: *I argue that _____(state your position)_____ because ____(give your arguments in a list)_____.*

Example: *I argue that we should eliminate mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenses because they force judges to put offenders in prison, and because it costs the U.S. too much money to imprison these offenders.*

Body Paragraphs

7th/8th grade expectation: *Topic sentence, 2+ pieces of evidence quoted right from the source and cited, with each piece of evidence explained*

4. Each body paragraph begins with a topic sentence. This is a sentence that states the argument you are writing about in that paragraph (so, go back to your thesis and choose one of your arguments).

5. Provide evidence by quoting directly from a source. Introduce the quote by naming the source, then copy the quote word-for-word.

Example: *According to (name of source, e.g. The Economist), "copy the quote word-for-word in quotation marks."*

6. Explain the evidence, and tell the reader HOW it proves your argument is valid.

Example: *This evidence shows . . . This supports the argument _____ (arguments in the topic sentence) because . . .*

7. Repeat steps 5 & 6 for as many pieces of evidence you want to include.

Example body paragraph: *(topic sentence →) Mandatory minimum sentences force judges to put certain drug offenders in prison, regardless of the circumstances around their involvement. (evidence, quoted right from the source, which is cited →) According to the Criminal Justice Policy Foundation (CJPF), "A minimum 5-year sentence (up to 40 years) must be imposed for distribution of 5 grams of methamphetamine, only a 5-day supply for a heavy user." (explanation →) This shows that a judge must give people 5 years of prison if they are found guilty of possessing 5 grams of meth, even if it's only their first arrest, or if a friend left it in their car, or whatever unique circumstances might be involved. This supports the argument because it shows that judges have no control to give offenders less prison time, or other sentences they feel are appropriate (e.g. rehab, community service, probation).*

    (link to the last paragraph →) There is also evidence that judges feel these laws are unjust. (more evidence! →) According to CJPF, "Each year tens of thousands of low-level state and federal defendants face harsh punishments that are often denounced by the judges forced to impose them at the time of sentencing." (explanation →)This states that judges often denounce the sentences they give, which means that they disagree with what the law forces them to do. This supports the argument because it shows that judges would give different, smaller sentences if they were allowed.

    (Transition to the topic sentence for the next argument →) Another problem with mandatory minimum sentences is that it costs the U.S. too much money. (This would continue on with evidence and explanations . . .)

Counter-argument Paragraph

7th/8th grade expectation: 1 counter-argument and 2+ defenses

8. Body paragraphs can also address counter-arguments—the arguments against your position. The purpose of this kind of paragraph is to show that you understand the opposite side of the issue, but your reasons are still more important.

   The first sentence should name the opposing argument.

Example: *Some say that _____(opposing argument)_____. However, _____(explain why it is wrong or less important and defend your position. Use additional evidence if you can)_____.*

Example counter-argument paragraph: *(state the opposing argument →) Some say that mandatory minimum sentencing makes the U.S. safer because it takes drug criminals off the streets. (defend your position →) However, the fact is that drug crimes are not decreasing. (evidence helps →) According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, "The estimated number of arrests for drug abuse violations has been increasing." (explanation →) This shows that putting people in prison for drug crimes has not kept us any safer because drug sellers are finding new customers to trap in addiction. If we want to be safer, we need to think of a new way to deal with drugs, not keep throwing people in jail for mandated, long sentences. (Continue with a second defense and explanation . . .)*
   (If you know other arguments the opposite side might make, you can follow the same pattern and address them in extra paragraphs.)

Conclusion Paragraph
7th/8th grade expectation: 150 words

9. To close your paper, review the benefits of following your position. You can also discuss how things will not get better (maybe even get worse) if we don't follow your position. If your position will allow us to try new things, you can give readers some of those ideas as well. Close with a strong statement that shows confidence in your position.

Example: *If we   (repeat your position) , then this will   (explain the positive things that can change)   .*

Example: *If we don't   (repeat your position) , then   (explain the problems that will remain or explain how things might get worse over time)   .*

Example: *If we   (repeat your position) , then we are open to try new options to address the problem. One possibility is   (explain an idea)   . (Explain the idea further if needed. Then, if you have more ideas, you can continue (e.g. "another possibility is . . . a third possibility is . . .").*

Example:

Example conclusion: *(review the benefits* →*) In closing, if we eliminate mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenses, then this will allow judges to give fair sentences according to each person's situation. Another benefit is that there will likely be less people sentenced to prison, and those who are sentenced may be there for less time. (discuss problems that remain or might get worse* →*) If we don't eliminate mandatory minimum sentencing, then our prisons will continue to fill up. Meanwhile, the drug problems will continue anyway. Sadly, the problem might even get worse because prison breaks up families, making life hard for youth, who then may become the next victims of drug abuse. (share things we can try differently* →*) But, if we end mandatory minimum sentencing, we can find new ways to address the drug problem. One possibility is sentencing addicts to rehabilitation centers, giving them the help they need. Another possibility is sentencing offenders to community service or career training programs, allowing them to stay connected with the community and improve their lives. (close with confident statement* →*) I know that ending mandatory minimum sentencing will bring positive changes to dealing with drug offenses.*