



**English Learner Formative Assessment (ELFA):**

# **A Design Framework**

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The goal of the *English Learner Formative Assessment (ELFA)* project is to develop a useful assessment tool that teachers can use to help English learner (EL) students develop important academic reading comprehension skills. In particular, this project employs a formative assessment approach in order to provide teachers with a means to assess, understand, and adapt instruction based on evidence of student learning. In this project, a set of academic reading comprehension assessments and accompanying materials have been developed for teachers to use as part of their daily instruction.

This document describes the major design features that we incorporated in developing ELFA assessments. In identifying major design principles and features, we drew on previous research and literature on effective strategies to support teaching and learning for EL students. Although this ELFA Design Framework document was originally targeted at assessment developers as a guide for creating the ELFA assessment forms, it also should be useful for teachers who plan to use the ELFA assessment and the accompanying user materials to understand the underlying design and major characteristics of ELFA assessments. This document also will provide a better understanding of what the ELFA assessment measures and how it can be used for formative purposes for both assessment developers and assessment users.

## Purpose of the ELFA Assessment

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ELFA is a classroom-based, formative assessment of academic reading comprehension for EL students in middle schools. In particular, the assessment is designed to be used in classes — English as a Second Language (ESL), English Language Development (ELD), or English Language Arts (ELA) — in which the goal is to develop students' English language proficiency.

The purposes of the assessment are:

- to assess EL students' reading comprehension skills for academic texts
- to provide teachers with information about their EL students' reading comprehension skills for instructional planning
- to provide EL students with opportunities to use explicit reading strategies to improve their reading comprehension skills

## Target Population (Intended Users)

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Since this assessment is intended to be used formatively for both learning and teaching, the target population includes both students and teachers:

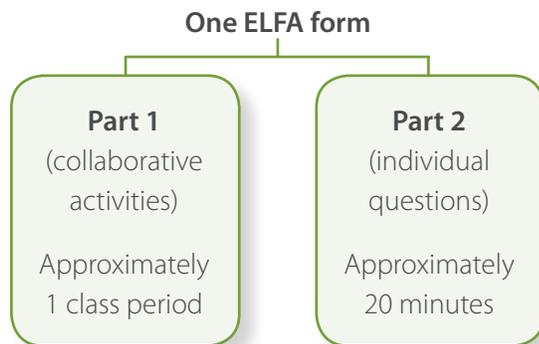
- Teachers — ESL, bilingual, or ELA teachers instructing EL students in reading development
- Students — EL students who
  - are classified as ELs based on a school's placement test;
  - take ESL, ELD, or ELA classes designated for ELs; and
  - are at an intermediate or higher level of English proficiency based on the school's English language proficiency (ELP) assessment.

## ELFA Assessment Form Structure

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Nine forms of the assessment are available, including three in each difficulty category (*Developing*, *Intermediate*, and *Experienced*). The reading passages of each form were purposefully developed for the three levels in terms of the linguistic complexity, academic orientations of the topic, and argument structure. We also utilized the *TextEvaluator*<sup>™</sup> tool to measure various dimensions of the linguistic complexity of our reading passages, in addition to human ratings (e.g., ratings by assessment specialists, researchers, and teachers). This tool, developed by ETS, provided us with a profile of the linguistic complexity of each of the reading passages of our assessment (e.g., the total number of words, lexical density, academic words, complex sentence structures, grade-level indices). All reading passages also were reviewed by ESL teachers at the middle school level for the appropriateness of the topic, interest, relevance, and language complexity for their students. The difficulty of items was taken into consideration for the difficulty of each form. Each form of the test consists of two parts (Figure 1), both based on one reading passage. The reading passage presents the opposing viewpoints of two authors regarding one main topic.

**Figure 1. Two parts of one ELFA form.**



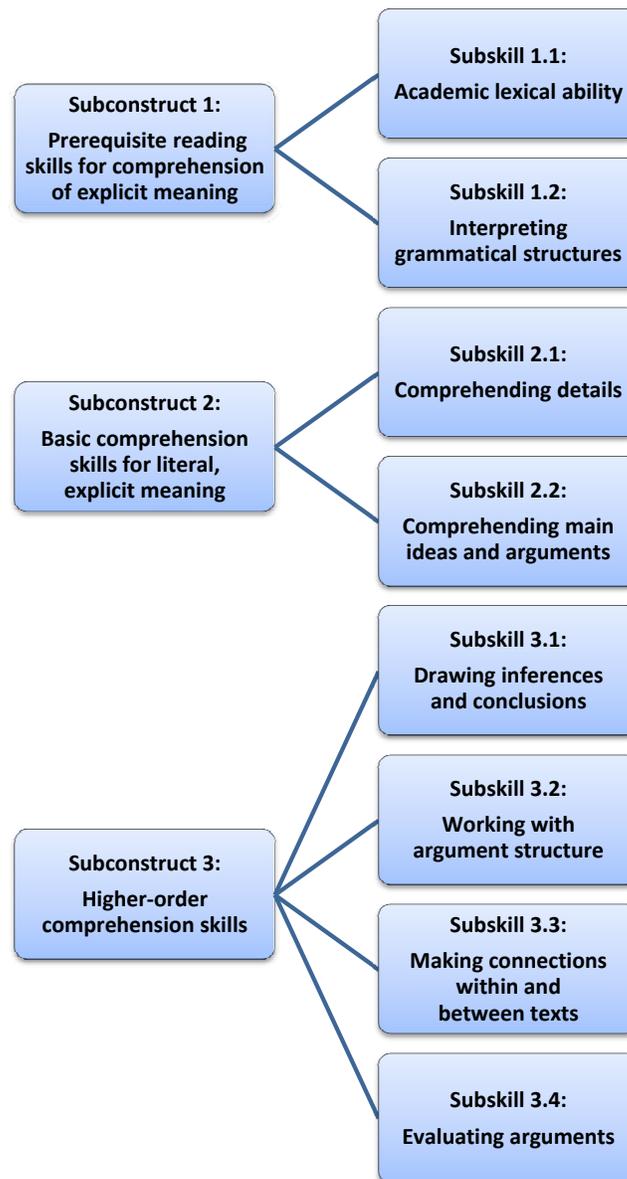
Part 1 is designed to be completed with a peer and provides scaffolding activities to help EL students unpack the given passage and sequentially utilize basic to higher-order reading comprehension skills. Part 1 includes both selected-response and constructed-response tasks. Part 2 includes 14 selected-response questions. Students are asked to complete Part 2 individually. Teachers have flexibility to choose any form or any set of forms, considering their EL students' English proficiency. The various forms can be administered as a regular part of class instruction.

## Overall Construct: Argumentative/Persuasive Text Reading Ability

The focus of the ELFA construct is on students' basic and higher-order reading skills, following the reading model developed by O'Reilly and Sheehan (2009). Particularly, the construct of the ELFA forms focuses on students' reading comprehension skills in handling persuasive genre texts in middle schools. We selected the *argumentative/persuasive* genre as it is one of the most prevalent genres that middle school students encounter in academic contexts.

The following subconstructs and subskills (Figure 2) have been identified as the major skills to be learned in reading persuasive genre texts for middle school EL students.

**Figure 2. Subconstructs and subskills in reading persuasive genre texts.**



## Definition of Subskills

Below is a specific definition of each subskill.

- **Subconstruct 1: Prerequisite reading skills for comprehension of explicit meaning**
  - **Subskill 1.1: Academic lexical ability**  
**Definition:** Ability to comprehend academic words (including general academic words, derived forms with complex morphology, and polysemous words) in meaningful context, through use of context clues, word parts, or with reference to pre-existing knowledge.
  - **Subskill 1.2: Interpreting grammatical structures in academic text**  
**Definition:** Ability to comprehend specific grammatical forms (e.g., passive voice) in the context of academic language functions (e.g., definitions, comparisons, descriptions of processes) to access meaning.
- **Subconstruct 2: Comprehension of literal meaning in academic persuasive text**
  - **Subskill 2.1: Comprehending details**  
**Definition:** Ability to locate and comprehend key information that is conveyed literally in the passage, especially statements that function as support for an author’s main argument and those that occur within the context of academic language functions (e.g., expressing cause and effect, defining, justifying a position).
  - **Subskill 2.2: Comprehending main ideas and arguments**  
**Definition:** Ability to identify the overall argument in a persuasive text or the main idea of a paragraph when it appears explicitly in the prose, including identification of the text type (persuasive) and a very general sense of what the article is about.
- **Subconstruct 3: Higher-order comprehension and skills**
  - **Subskill 3.1: Drawing inferences and conclusions**  
**Definition:** Ability to access meanings that are logically implied rather than literally stated in the text.
  - **Subskill 3.2: Working with argument structure**  
**Definition:** Ability to identify and understand paragraph-level rhetorical structures (e.g., intro, body, conclusion; thesis, antithesis; thesis, supporting evidence).
  - **Subskill 3.3: Making connections within and between texts**  
**Definition:** Ability to interpret different parts of a text together, including text, figures, and images, as well as the ability to compare two texts by noting similarities and differences.
  - **Subskill 3.4: Evaluating arguments**  
**Definition:** Ability to apply specific criteria to evaluate the strength of an author’s argument (e.g., determining whether evidence supports, weakens, or is irrelevant to the author’s claim).

## Core Development Guiding Principles

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The following core principles guided the development of ELFA assessments. We sought to:

- Establish an initial purpose for the reading in the beginning of the assessment by providing an authentic reading situation (e.g., to prepare for a class discussion, to find specific information, to agree/disagree with the author, to evaluate the adequacy of arguments and evidence). Having a purpose to read should increase students' motivation and engagement.
- Provide scaffolded tasks in a meaningful sequence. The scaffolding and sequence should entail the following: (1) a reading process that would engage readers to accomplish a given reading purpose, (2) tasks that would help EL students unpack the passage to build comprehension, (3) tasks that reinforce students' close reading of the text, and (4) tasks that would foster the students' use of reading strategies.
- Use balance and judgment for the degree of scaffolding. Overscaffolding will result in a long, boring assessment, while underscaffolding will result in an overly difficult assessment that frustrates the students (or in something that might resemble a typical summative assessment).
- Design tasks and items that enhance students' comprehension of a given reading passage. Every item should require comprehension of the passage (in part or in whole) for a correct response, and no item should be answerable without reference to the passage.
- Design the tasks and items in such a way that they flow into one another. Students should be able to increase comprehension while working on the tasks/items in Part 1. Later items may build on the information learned or collected in earlier items. This principle should apply even for the foundational reading skills (i.e., lexical ability and grammatical knowledge).
- Specify what evidence will be provided from each item/task. This will facilitate teachers' instructional planning based on the assessment results.
- Design an assessment that may be easily embedded into daily instruction. The tasks and items themselves can be viewed as reading and learning activities, not necessarily testing activities (Part 1). Teachers should be able to easily devise scaffolding activities for the tasks.
- Provide opportunities for students to interact and to engage in discussion while completing the tasks (e.g., group or pair work where individuals have different responsibilities, open-ended items).
- Provide clear and self-explanatory directions.

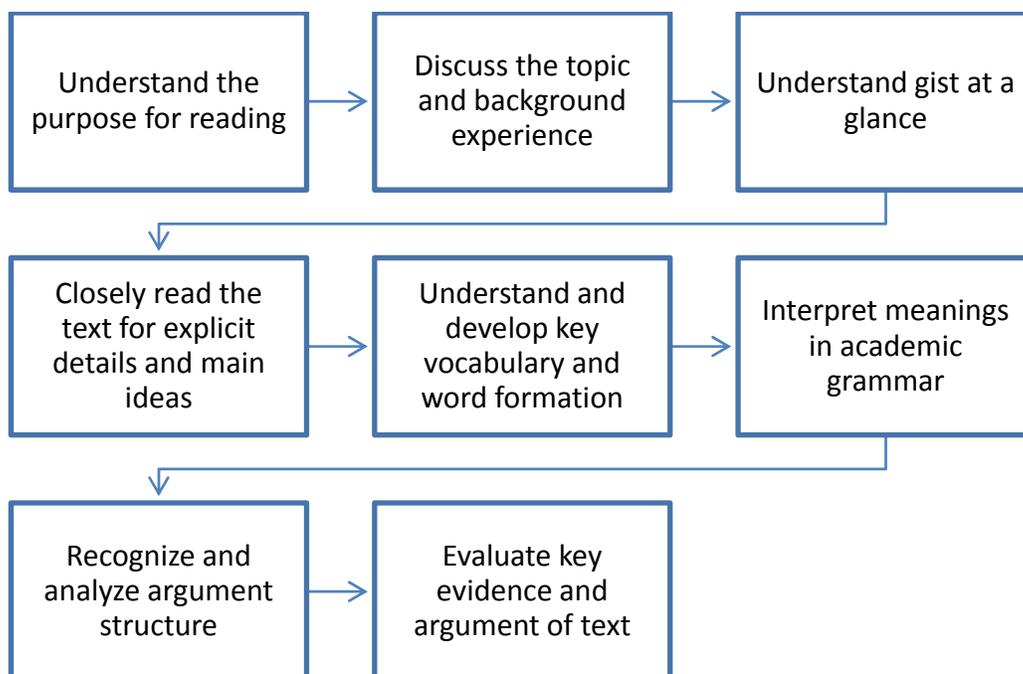
The following specific suggestions are included to illustrate the role that the above guidelines are expected to play in actual form development.

### The Sequence of Tasks

A guiding principle for the sequence of assessment tasks is to mirror, as closely as possible, actual stages in the negotiation of textual meaning that a typical target-audience student might be expected to go through for the particular text and purpose given in a specific form. While keeping in mind the difficulty of the passage, the authentic goal embedded into the tasks, and the learning progression, we aimed to design the ELFA tasks corresponding to the crucial stages in the reading process and identify likely sources of comprehension breakdown. For example, it might make sense to begin with a warm-up item that allows students to discuss the general topic openly with their partners and encourages recall of relevant vocabulary. This discussion can then be followed by a gist item that focuses on the specific text, as students are likely to attempt to get the gist of any passage first, only employing different strategies if this endeavor is unsuccessful. After this initial gist item, subsequent items might focus on accessing key meaning at the word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph levels, before moving on to higher-order tasks such as identifying facts and opinions, claims and evidence, and finally summarizing or evaluating.

In summary, the ELFA tasks are organized in the following order of the areas (Figure 3):

**Figure 3. Order of ELFA tasks.**



### **The Provision of a Reading Purpose**

It is important to provide an explicit purpose for reading and activities to facilitate student engagement. By providing a purpose for reading, students will understand clearly their overall goal in reading the text and answering the questions, which they can work toward achieving through each step of the reading process. It also provides students with a clearer focus as they engage in the text.

Each ELFA assessment form begins with a specific reading purpose like the one below:

**In this activity you are going to read an article from an environmental magazine. The author of the article is Mark Acosta. Mr. Acosta wants to persuade you. He wants you to agree with him. Your job is to read the article and answer questions. Later, you will read a letter from a reader named Wendy Black. Ms. Black disagrees with Mark Acosta. In the end, you have to decide which person you agree with.**

### **Scaffolding in Tasks**

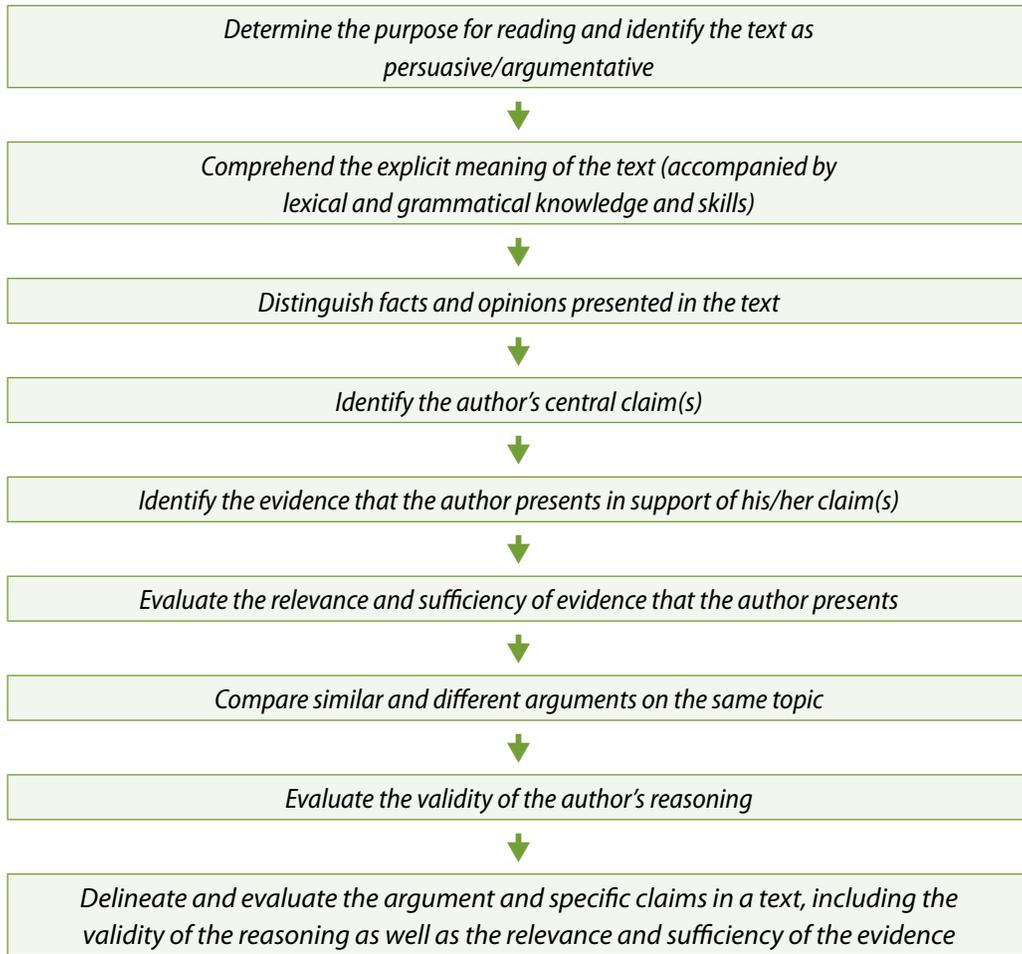
The assessment tasks are designed in such a way that they provide scaffolding and, thus, students build comprehension of texts through the tasks. To serve the role of scaffolding, the tasks are designed with the following principles. First, tasks should be completed based on students' comprehension of the text (not based on students' test-taking strategies). Second, tasks should provide explicit strategies that the students can use to help them complete the tasks successfully. Third, in some cases, the task questions can provide essential information that a student needs in order to begin. By designing the tasks with scaffolding, it is anticipated that teachers can also use the tasks selectively, depending on their students' abilities and learning goals.

### **A Learning Progression**

For an effective use of formative assessment, it is critical to specify a clear learning progression model of the specific domain (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, or listening) in which teachers and students are engaged. A learning progression model is conceptualized as an underlying scheme or road map to guide students in meeting the learning goal (Black, Wilson, & Yao, 2011). This learning progression model can facilitate teachers' interpretation of where students are and their understanding of how best to adapt instruction toward the targeted goal in the learning progression. In ELFA, a learning progression model is postulated at a micro-level in a narrow domain of reading comprehension of persuasive genre texts. In defining the progression model, a higher-order competency goal should be defined first. With the overall construct of ELFA, the following standard from the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts serves as an expected learning goal (CCSS, 2010, p. 60):

***8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.***

A basic learning progression is proposed for this standard:



It is important to note that these steps may not occur in linear progression, but they are assumed to interact and to be essential components that lead to the competency in the final goal. Each of these basic components of the learning progression may in turn be undergirded by prerequisite linguistic and comprehension competencies. In the ELFA forms, tasks are designed to tap on each stage and to help EL students reach the goal of comprehending academic persuasive texts and building critical reading skills.

### ***A Focus on Encouraging Strategy Use***

The ELFA assessments do not *measure* the use of strategies directly, but they are designed to explicitly encourage the deployment of good reading habits and the development of reading knowledge and skills. Table 1 includes some strategies that we envisioned students would utilize while engaging in ELFA tasks.

## Sample Learning/Reading Strategies and Definitions for ELFA Items

**Table 1a. Start of a Lesson (Beginning of the ELFA forms)**

Strategy	Definition	Other Possible Terms
<b>Activating Background Knowledge</b>	Think about and use what you already know to help you do the task	Use what you know, elaborate on prior knowledge
<b>Predicting</b>	Anticipate information to prepare and give direction for a task	Anticipate, guess
<b>Setting Goals</b>	Develop personal objectives, identify the purpose of the task	Determine destination, establish purpose, plan objectives

**Table 1b. During a Lesson**

Strategy	Definition	Other Possible Terms
<b>Directing Attention</b>	Focus on key words, phrases, ideas, and/or skills	Scan, find specific information, focus on specific task
<b>Using Imagery</b>	Create an image to represent information or use an image to better understand information	Visualization, mental picture, draw a picture, use a picture
<b>Asking Questions to Clarify</b>	Check understanding to keep track of comprehension and identify challenges	Ask for explanation, verification, and examples; pose questions to self
<b>Substituting</b>	Use another word that has the same meaning, use synonym or descriptive phrase for unknown meaning	Paraphrase, circumlocute
<b>Classifying/Grouping</b>	Make groups of similar things (word forms, vocabulary, ideas, characters)	Classify, categorize, group, order, label
<b>Using Resources</b>	Look up information in a dictionary, ask a friend, use the Internet, atlas, encyclopedia, library, magazines, newspaper	Look it up
<b>Taking Notes</b>	Write down important words or concepts	T list, KWL (What I Know, What I Want to Know, What I Learned) chart, personal dictionary, idea maps, flow charts, outlines

**Table 1c. After a Task, Lesson, or Session**

Strategy	Definition	Other Possible Terms
<b>Evaluating Strategies</b>	Judge how well the strategy worked to help you understand and learn the material	Assessing techniques, reflecting on learning
<b>Self-Evaluating</b>	Judge how well you learned the material/did the task	Reflections on learning, assessing self, check yourself
<b>Re-evaluating Goals</b>	Re-evaluate personal objectives previously set, confirm previous assumptions about the purpose of the task	Determine destination, re-establish purpose, consider and evaluate objectives
<b>Summarizing</b>	Create a mental, oral, or written summary of information	Construct a summary
<b>Verifying Predictions and Guessing</b>	Check whether your guesses or predictions were correct	Verification, responding to prediction

To the extent possible, assessment tasks are framed as repeatable strategic activities geared toward accomplishing the goal presented in the assessment scenario. In this way, the assessment activities themselves model good reading behaviors and aid in the development of a learning strategy repertoire on the part of the student. Here are three ELFA sample tasks to illustrate how assessment tasks can be framed as the deployment of a reading strategy. The third example is particularly intended for EL students.

1. Any time you need to evaluate an author's argument, you must first identify the author's **claim** (or claims) and the **evidence** that the author uses to support the claim(s). A claim is what we call it when someone says something that can be true or false. Evidence is a fact that either strengthens or weakens a claim. Here is an example:

Claim:	The Earth is round.
<b>Evidence that strengthens:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– When a boat sails away from the shore, eventually it disappears below the horizon.</li> <li>– Photographs of Earth from outer space show that it is shaped like a round ball.</li> <li>– Nobody has ever found a place where the Earth ends.</li> </ul>
<b>Evidence that weakens:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– When a person stands on the Earth's surface it appears to be flat.</li> </ul>

2. What claims does the author of the article make? Write "yes" or "no" in the empty boxes.

Claims	Does the author make this claim?
A comet can never harm life on Earth.	No
Halley's Comet has no poisonous gas in its tail.	No
It is important to consider claims and evidence to avoid wasting money.	Yes
Comet pills do not protect against the gas in the tail of Halley's Comet.	No

3. This article contains many long sentences. When you find it hard to understand a long sentence, sometimes it is because you lose track of the connections between **pronouns** and the **nouns** they refer to. It can help you understand if you connect each pronoun to its noun. Here is an example of a long sentence with a pronoun:

The newspapers reported that Earth would soon be passing through the tail of **Halley's Comet**, and that **it** contained a poisonous gas that would be harmful to human life.

The pronoun “it” refers to the noun “Halley’s Comet.” Now look at these long sentences from the article. The pronouns in each sentence are underlined. Can you circle the nouns that they refer to?

Sometimes there is a lot of evidence for a claim that an author makes and just a little bit of evidence against it.

Although they were expensive, the products that were sold to protect against the poisonous gasses had no real use.

Before humans knew much about astronomy, they often thought that comets were scary because they meant that something bad was going to happen.

## Use of ELFA Materials

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The present document focuses on illustrating the major design characteristics of the ELFA assessment forms. In particular, it describes the intended uses of the ELFA assessment and underlying design principles of the assessment tasks to provide some guidance on how to use ELFA appropriately. It should be noted that ELFA also contains the *Teacher’s Guide* and *Teacher’s Versions* of each ELFA assessment form. As formative assessment is not a tool or assessment artifact but a process and a part of teachers’ daily instruction, other ELFA materials (i.e., *Teacher’s Guide*, *Teacher’s Versions*) are designed to facilitate the formative process for teachers. These additional materials highlight the importance of how formative information can be gathered using ELFA and how to interpret students’ responses in order to adapt instruction to support students’ needs. Therefore, the users of ELFA are advised to review the ELFA *Teacher’s Guide* and *Teacher’s Versions* in addition to the actual ELFA assessment forms.

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