TEACHING AND ASSESSING STUDENT WRITING: A Guide for Teachers of All Subjects

Adapted from The Writing Revolution

by Judith C. Hochman, Ed.D. & Natalie Wexler
INTRODUCTION

Measuring the quality of student writing is one of the most difficult tasks in educational assessment. Unlike subjects like math and science where there are “right” and “wrong” answers, writing is more subjective in nature. While there are correct grammar, usage, and spelling parameters, the following factors can interfere with accurate assessment of student writing:

- **Decoding.** When students are asked to write in response to a written prompt, they often have a hard time decoding it.

- **Mechanical Errors.** Technical mistakes with regards to punctuation, spelling, and grammar can overshadow a student’s ability to organize ideas or use complex sentence structures.

- **Background Information.** Lack of background knowledge about a topic causes some students to have trouble understanding the prompt.

- **Computers.** Students who are more comfortable with technology will have an advantage when responses are written using a computer.

GETTING A HANDLE ON WRITING ASSESSMENT

Although a difficult task, it’s essential that you assess the quality of student writing throughout the school year in order to tailor your instruction accordingly. Unlike standardized tests that do little to inform teaching decisions around writing and standard rubrics that are more useful for ranking students than providing specific suggestions for progress, there are ways to evaluate student writing and home in on their strengths and areas for improvement.

The *Writing Revolution: A Guide to Advancing Thinking Through Writing in All Subject Areas and Grades* by Judith C. Hochman and co-author Natalie Wexler introduces the Hochman Method, which uses assessment tools to help students not only become better writers, but also better thinkers. The authors’ theory in a nutshell: Those who think clearly, write clearly and vice versa.

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So what is good writing? Author John Langdon has identified four criteria that most readers use—perhaps even subconsciously—to identify solid writing:

1. **Structure**: Are the sentences in the paragraph and the paragraphs in a longer composition arranged appropriately?

2. **Coherence**: Does what you’re reading make sense? Are sentences and paragraphs logically related to one another?

3. **Unity**: Does every sentence support the main idea of the paragraph? Does every paragraph support the main idea of the composition?

4. **Sentence Skills**: Are sentences grammatically correct? Are they varied in complexity and is there a mix of sentence starters?

Regardless of the subject matter or grade level you teach, you can help your students incorporate all of these elements into their writing. And as their writing improves so will their reading comprehension, organizational and study skills, speaking abilities, and analytical skills.

**RESPONDING TO A PROMPT**

In order to make fair assessments, you'll have to measure your students’ writing progress at regular intervals: the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. An effective form of assessment is to ask your students to write in response to a prompt with little instructor guidance.

The key to using free-standing writing prompts is that your students have sufficient background information so that they feel confident enough to write about the topic. To this end, give your class the same prompt, which can be a summary, narrative, or a brief description depending on their grade level. Write the topic on the board, read it aloud without elaborating, and then ask students to respond.

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You may want your students to respond to a specific text rather than a general prompt. This type of assessment more closely mirrors what students are required to do on Common Core-aligned state writing tests where they’ll be asked to respond to a passage or compare two texts or a text and a video. Consider asking your students to respond to multiple sources in preparation for state-mandated tests.

Keep in mind that students may either have trouble decoding the text or lack background knowledge that will prevent them from understanding what they read. To guard against this problem, you can use a text that your students are familiar with or a new text on a topic they have studied in depth.

Whether you chose to use a free-standing prompt or text-based assessment, tell your students that the purpose of the activity is to help them develop their writing skills. Ask them to keep their writing samples brief (first graders can write a sentence or two and older Level 1 and Level 2 students should limit their samples to a single paragraph). You’ll be asking them to edit and revise their writing, and you don’t want them to feel overwhelmed if they’ve written at length.
EVALUATING SPECIFIC STRATEGIES

When assessing student writing, you can use a variety of tools such as our Single Paragraph Checker or the Independent Writing Tracker to record individual as well as whole-class progress. You can also administer diagnostic assessments two or three times a year to gauge whether students have mastered specific writing strategies covered in class. Use data from these assessments to set your objectives for the class as a whole and differentiate instruction to meet individual needs.

For practical assessment tools, writing rubrics, and tips on how to incorporate the Hochman Method in your class, visit www.thewritingrevolution.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Judith C. Hochman, Ed.D, is the creator of the Hochman Method and founder of The Writing Revolution, a nonprofit organization dedicated to training and supporting teachers and school leaders in implementing this explicit set of evidence-based strategies for teaching writing.

Natalie Wexler is an education journalist who serves on the board of trustees of The Writing Revolution. Her articles and essays have appeared in a number of publications, including the New York Times and the Washington Post.

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