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The Assessment of Language, Reading Comprehension, and Written Expression

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Introduction

There is no single test that can reveal everything we want to know about a student's reading or writing skills. Many tests of reading comprehension are brutally short, yielding a single score that reveals little about a student's strengths and weaknesses. Other tests are narrow in scope; they do not help us learn about those all-important strands of the reading rope. Assessing written expression is even more challenging. We struggle to define what we should be testing. Will sentence length tasks do? Is it important to measure both narrative and expository text? What about handwriting and spelling?

This issue of *Teaching Reading in Brief* will focus on the assessment of reading comprehension and written expression as seen through the window of oral language. We will begin with a brief discussion of the relationship between oral and written language, as well as the importance of listening comprehension and vocabulary. We will then examine the assessment of reading comprehension (thinking guided by print), together with the assessment of written expression (how we think on paper).

Oral Language

There is no escaping the fact that oral language lies at the heart of reading and writing. After all, language is language whether we take it in through our ears or read it off a page. Given the importance of oral language, it is worthwhile to include measures of listening comprehension (LC) when assessing the different skills that support reading comprehension (RC).

An assessment of receptive language, i.e., how we understand language as it is used by others, can provide important information about a student's potential for understanding what they read. When we see strong scores on a test of listening comprehension, we might think, "We expect that he will be a strong comprehender once we teach him to read the words." This statement is positive in its outlook and provides an appropriate goal for the student's future.

When we include listening comprehension in our assessment of reading skills, four profiles of readers emerge. Each of these profiles indicates a different pathway for instruction.

Curious Question
When French became the dominant language of England, what happened to duplicate words? English has many synonyms, but were any words lost over time?

Profile	Description	Recommendations
Listening Comprehension (LC) and Reading Comprehension (RC) are strong.	Reading skills are at or above grade level.	Continue with the instructional plan and support, with activities for enrichment.
LC is stronger than RC.	This profile is what we typically see in students with dyslexia.	Assess decoding, word recognition skills, alphabet, and phonological processing to determine the foundation for structured literacy instruction.
LC is weaker than RC.	Consider aspects of hearing and executive function (attention, working memory, etc.)	Verify hearing and vision. Examine executive functioning skills and teach strategies for active listening.
Both LC and RC are weak.	Students with this profile may have a language disorder; they may also struggle with decoding skills.	Consult with a speech-language pathologist (SLP) for additional testing and/or recommendations. Also assess decoding, word recognition skills, alphabet, and phonological processing to determine the foundation for structured literacy instruction.
Remember: Always check vision and hearing.		

Measures of listening comprehension can be found in test batteries such as the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement, Third Edition (2014) and the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test, Fourth Edition (2020). Sadly, there are few progress monitoring/screening tools that assess listening comprehension over the short term. The Acadience Reading Diagnostic offers the Comprehension, Fluency, and Oral Language assessment that permits educators to investigate oral language skills as a foundation for instruction in reading comprehension.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is integral to understanding what we read and expressing our thoughts when we write. It is a strong predictor of reading comprehension (Ouellette, 2006). Words are the building blocks of good thoughts, and they support our efforts to express ourselves with grammar, precision, and style. It is not only important to know a lot of words, but also to understand words in depth (Nagy & Herman, 1987).

Vocabulary is often assessed with a standardized, norm-referenced test as part of a speech and language evaluation, an evaluation of cognitive functioning, or a battery documenting the language skills of English language learners and emergent bilingual students. These standardized norm-referenced tests can also be administered by special educators who meet the requirements as determined by the test publisher. There are some options, such as the EasyCBM tool highlighted below, for classroom educators who seek to monitor progress in vocabulary acquisition.

There are also specialized tests designed to assess the vocabulary skills of bilingual students in both of their languages. These tests provide a more comprehensive picture of language knowledge and can help distinguish between a language disorder and a language difference. Tests, such as the Bilingual Verbal Ability Test (BVAT) and the Bilingual English-Spanish Assessment (BESA) employ the use of conceptual scoring, a method that gives credit for responses provided in either language.

Test	Who Can Administer	Task	Comment
Acadience Reading Diagnostic: Comprehension, Fluency, & Oral Language (CFOL) (Powell-Smith, Kaminski, & Good, 2014)	Progress monitoring tool administered by the classroom educator	Providing oral definitions of words, understanding words with multiple meanings and figurative language.	Tracks the development of written vocabulary. Grades K - 6
EasyCBM Vocabulary (Alonzo, Tindal, Ulmer & Glasgow, 2006)	Progress monitoring tool administered by the classroom educator	Selecting the word(s) that best represent the meaning of a target word or phrase in context	Tracks the development of written vocabulary. Grades 2 - 8
Expressive Vocabulary Test, Third Edition (EVT3; Williams, 2019)	Standardized norm-referenced test administered by a school psychologist, SLP, or special educator	Providing a synonym or labeling a picture	Generalized measure of the ability to retrieve and speak a word upon demand. Ages 2 ½ - 90+
Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test, Fourth Edition (Martin, 2011)	Standardized norm-referenced test administered by a school psychologist, SLP, or special educator	Labeling a picture	Generalized measure of the ability to retrieve and speak a word upon demand. Also available in a Spanish-Bilingual Edition. Ages 2 - 80+
Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Fifth Edition (PPVT5; Dunn, 2019)	Standardized norm-referenced test administered by a school psychologist, SLP, or special educator	Offering multiple-choice items, where students point to pictures of orally presented words.	Generalized measure of receptive vocabulary; not typically administered more than once a year. May not provide specific information regarding vocabulary acquisition that would be helpful for instruction. Ages 2 ½ - 90+

Continued on the next page.

| Test	Who Can Administer	Task	Comment
Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 5th Edition Vocabulary subtest (WISC-5; Wechsler, 2014)	Standardized norm-referenced test administered by a specialist trained in intellectual assessment	Providing oral definitions of words spoken by the examiner	Responses provide insight into the depth of vocabulary knowledge, overall expressive language skill, and organization. Ages 6 - 16
Remember: Always check hearing and vision.			

Vocabulary tests are adept at measuring the breadth of word knowledge, i.e., how many words on the assessment, as an indicator of the size of a student's vocabulary. They are not particularly good at measuring the depth of knowledge and to what degree a student can appreciate subtleties of word meanings in different contexts.

Assessing Vocabulary Orally

Vocabulary is measured both receptively (through the ears) and expressively (through the mouth). When we look at receptive and expressive language skills, we learn different things about our students. Receptive vocabulary (RV) tests require that students point to pictures in response to words spoken by the examiner. These tests measure how well our student understands the words that they encounter. Expressive vocabulary (EV) tests require examinees to provide a synonym or label a picture to measure the ability to access desired words at any given moment. Some tests of expressive vocabulary require students to provide oral definitions of words. Oral definitions are particularly interesting as they provide a window into a student's depth of thought, organization, and even skill with sentence formulation.

Assessing Vocabulary in Print

Tests that assess vocabulary in print measure both word recognition and the understanding of word meanings. When students earn low scores, we need to ask ourselves why. Is it skill with word recognition, the consequence of a limited oral vocabulary, or is it both? The answer to this question has important implications for instruction. For some of these students, the path to skilled reading will be built on a foundation of work in word recognition, decoding, and phonological processing. For others, the path to improvement will focus on oral language skills, word structure, and word meanings. And then some will require instruction in both.
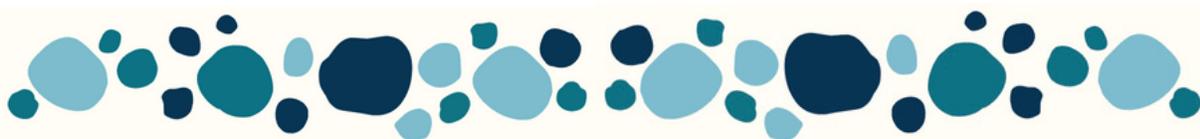
Profiles of Vocabulary

Four profiles of students emerge when we test both receptive and expressive vocabulary.

Profile	Description	Recommendations
Receptive Vocabulary (RV) and Expressive Vocabulary (EV) are strong.	Grade level skill or above	Continue with the instructional plan and support with activities for enrichment
RV is stronger than EV.	Possible challenge with word retrieval	Consult with a speech-language pathologist regarding observations of classroom performance
RV is weaker than EV.	Consider hearing and aspects of executive function (attention, working memory, processing speed, the ability to initiate and bring tasks to a close)	Verify hearing and vision. Examine EF skills and teach strategies for active listening.
Both RV and EV are low.	Vocabulary is weak.	Consult with an SLP. Explicitly teach Tier II word meanings and usage. Teach morphological awareness and semantic mapping. Provide opportunities for practice.
Remember: Always check hearing and vision.		

Reading Comprehension

Students with poor reading comprehension are a diverse group, and there is no one-size-fits-all recommendation for instruction that will help them improve their understanding of language in print. The vast majority of individuals with poor reading comprehension struggle with decoding and word recognition skills, as they are unable to process the author's intent simply because they cannot read the words (Barquero et al., 2014; Shaywitz, 2003).

About 10% of students struggle with true comprehension deficits (Cain & Oakhill, 2007). These students may go unnoticed by their teachers; they do not stumble over words, and they do not read aloud with extraordinary effort. Despite their apparently good decoding skills, they find it difficult to comprehend text. Their answers to questions may be superficial. They may be unable to read between the lines, draw conclusions, and formulate a cohesive summary or narrative. Often, these challenges have their roots in weak oral language skills. Students with deficits in receptive language will have difficulty managing the language demands of print. Be sure to consult with a speech-language pathologist whenever a deficit in understanding language is suspected.

Sometimes, poor reading comprehension reflects an inability to read for specialized purposes and to apply strategies designed to focus and organize what we learn from print. In still other cases, the failure to comprehend may be the result of limited background knowledge because it is difficult to process content that is unfamiliar and strange. Understanding where comprehension breaks down is key to determining the pathway for instruction and reading for meaning.

Ways of Measuring Reading Comprehension

The purpose of a reading comprehension test is to shed light on how a student engages with text. Because experts do not share a common understanding of what reading comprehension is, the tests they design measure reading comprehension in different ways. Criterion-based tests, progress monitoring tools, and the standardized norm-referenced assessments each approach reading comprehension in their own way. Assessments may differ in passage length, literal and inferential content, and in the way the students interact with text. Some assessments permit students to reread passages prior to answering questions. Others require examinees to respond based on their recall after reading the text one time. Still others attempt to separate out the role of background knowledge by featuring esoteric content that requires students to acquire knowledge strictly from what they read. Assessments vary not only in content and purpose but also in the way students are queried.

Questions differ in their format (e.g., fill-in-the blank, mazes, multiple choice, open-ended). How students respond to these different types of questions can reveal much about their individual profiles. The more we know about the demands of a particular test, the better we can interpret the results. The table below provides guidance on what it means when students respond (or fail to respond) to different ways of asking questions.

Types of Questions Used to Measure Reading Comprehension		
Question Type	**Description of Comprehension Task**	**Comments**
Multiple Choice	Comparing and selecting one of three or four options that best answers the questions about a passage	May support students who have difficulty with word finding or challenge those with working memory deficits. Easy to score.
Fill in the Blank (cloze tasks)	Providing a missing word in a sentence	Only the perfect word will do. Can be challenging for those with difficulty finding words. Sentence length comprehension only. Easy to score.
Mazes	Selecting one of three to five options to fill in a missing word in a sentence	May mitigate challenges with word finding. Sentence length comprehension only. Easy to score.
True/False	Responding to YES/NO questions. "Is the ocean pink?"	Requires no expressive language skill. Measures concrete understanding only. Easy to score.
Open Ended	Formulating a verbal response as an indication of understanding	Provides a clear window into critical thinking and the ability to formulate a cogent, well-organized response. Harder to score.

Even small differences between tests can have a significant impact on a student's performance and the scores earned. It is important, therefore, to go beyond the score and think critically about what is really being measured. Here are a few additional words of caution:

1. Assessing Skill in Older Students: Tests with short passages, measuring skill at the sentence level, present a dilemma. The Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement (Schrank, McGrew, Mather, Wendling & Dailey, 2014), which is commonly used in a psycho-educational evaluation, requires students to fill-in the blank for sentence-length passages. The test is easy to administer; it permits educators and students to work efficiently and without fatigue. Short passages, however, are not necessarily able to reflect the demands placed upon students in real life, particularly those in middle school and high school. With short passages, we cannot measure a student's ability to pull together the content of an entire chapter, story, article, or text. We may see that they have difficulty taking in and organizing a lot of content.

When referral concerns include difficulties with completing reading assignments, we may need to supplement our assessment with samples of work completed (or not completed) in the classroom. We need to examine the quality of their work, whether the assignment was completed in the time permitted, and whether our student was able to draw reasonable conclusions and make connections within the text. We also need to consider (1) behavioral factors; (2) to what degree our students were able to work independently; (3) whether they had accommodations (such as audio or the support of an adult reading aloud or explaining the material); (4) the student's overall efficiency, accuracy, and purpose in completing the task. When measuring reading comprehension, it is essential to rule out challenges with decoding, word recognition, and fluency, and then focus on oral language skills and vocabulary comprehension to create a comprehensive intervention plan.
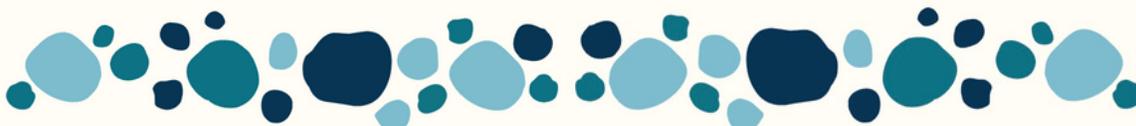
2. Assessing Skill in Young Students: Many tests/subtests of reading comprehension assess a wide age range of skill, beginning with those who are in Kindergarten or PreK and culminating in those who are in college. The expectation for reading comprehension in young students is quite low, and not at all comparable to what we would expect for older students. A subtest entitled Reading Comprehension might only require young students to match words or logos to pictures, a task that is more about word identification than it is about making meaning from print. If we do not familiarize ourselves with what a test actually measures for students, young and old, we are not able to interpret the score in a way that is helpful.
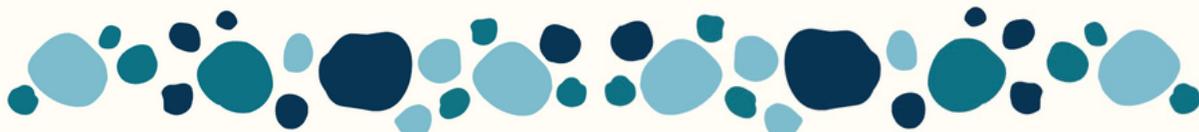
Tests Measuring Aspects of Reading Comprehension			
Progress Monitoring Tools			
Test	**Qualified to Administer**	**Task**	**Comments**
*Acadience Reading K-6 (Acadience Learning, 2021)	Progress monitoring tool administered by the classroom educator	Reading grade-level passages aloud while being timed. Retell is scored based on the number of words and quality.	There is no standalone comprehension test. ORF correlates with reading comprehension; most students who read with fluency also read with understanding. Grades K - 8
*Amplify mCLASS DIBELS 8th Edition (Amplify, n.d.) Mazes	Progress monitoring tool administered by the classroom educator	Reading a passage while being timed and selecting one of three options that best completes the sentence.	Every 7th word is replaced with a multiple-choice option. Measures sentence-level skill only. Grades 2 - 8
easyCBM® online progress monitoring assessment system (Alonzo, Tindal, Ulmer & Glasgow, 2006).	Progress monitoring tool administered by the classroom educator	Reading short passages and answering multiple-choice questions.	Mixture of narrative and expository texts. Untimed. Grades 2 - 8
*Dynamic Inventory of Basic Early Literacy Skills, Eighth Edition (DIBELS-8; University of Oregon, 2023) Oral Reading Fluency with Retell	Progress monitoring tool administered by the classroom educator	Reading grade-level passages aloud while being timed for one minute. Retell is scored based on the number of words read within 1 minute.	ORF correlates with reading comprehension; most students who read with fluency also read with understanding. Grades K - 6
Intervention Central Maze Passages (Wright, (n.d.)	Progress monitoring tool administered by the classroom educator	Reading a passage while being timed and selecting one of three options that best completes the sentence.	Every 7th word is replaced with a multiple-choice option. Measures sentence-level skill only. Grades 2 - 8

Standardized Norm-Reference Tests			
Test	**Qualified to Administer**	**Task**	**Comments**
Gray Oral Reading Tests, Fifth Edition (GORT-5; Wiederholt & Bryant, 2012)	Standardized norm-referenced test administered by a school psychologist, SLP, or special educator	Answering questions based on recall of passages read aloud while being timed.	Scored for rate, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Ages 6 through 23.
Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement, Third Edition (KTEA-3; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2014)	Standardized norm-referenced test administered by a school psychologist, SLP, or special educator	Young students may match words to pictures. Older students answer literal and inferential questions based on narrative and expository passages.	The battery offers the opportunity to compare LC and RC. Ages 4 - 25
Wechsler Individual Achievement Test, Fourth Edition (WIAT-4; Breaux, 2020)	Standardized norm-referenced test administered by a school psychologist, SLP, or special educator	Students respond to open-ended questions based upon a series of quasi-grade-level passages.	The battery includes tests of receptive and oral language. LC and RC may be compared. Ages - PK-12+
Woodcock-Johnson IV (WJ IV; Schrank, McGrew, Mather, Wendling, Dailey, 2014)	Standardized norm-referenced test administered by a school psychologist, SLP, or special educator	Filling in a missing word to show comprehension of a sentence-length passage.	Passages are short; fill-in-the-blank questions may penalize those with word finding (EL) deficits. Ages 2 - 90+
*Strongly Recommended by the Vermont Agency of Education in the [2025 Review and Recommendations: K-3 Universal Reading Screeners](#)			

Written Expression

Writers write for different purposes and with different styles. No one test measures it all. The marketplace for written language tests is not as well-developed as it is for reading comprehension tests. Options are limited, and the tests that are available measure a variety of different skills. The Woodcock-Johnson Writing Samples subtest, for example, measures skill at the sentence level (Schrank, Mather, & McGrew, 2014). The Kaufman Written Expression subtest measures the ability to engage in tasks related to narrative writing (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2014). The Wechsler Individual Achievement Test - 4 measures alphabet, sentence-level, and essay writing skills (Breaux, 2020).

Because written language tests assess writing skill in their own way, the scores earned by any one student will vary. A student who earns an average score on writing sentences on the Woodcock-Johnson may demonstrate below-average skill on the WIAT-4 when asked to formulate an essay. It is important to select a test that will tell us what we really want to know.

Skills to Measure in an Assessment of Written Expression

Written expression requires the integration of multiple skills. Sedita (2023) refers to these skills collectively as "the writing rope," a tribute to Scarborough's work on the skills that support the development of skilled reading (2001).

A good assessment should tease apart the skills that enable written language. A written language assessment might be highly focused, and limited to measures of handwriting and/or keyboarding, spelling, sentence-level skills, and/or writing fluency, as well as the ability to craft different text structures. An assessment might also, depending on the referral questions, be much broader, including aspects of language, cognition, and executive function, such as working memory and processing.

Virginia Berninger (1994), one of our gurus of written expression, tells us that we should measure the following skills:

Handwriting legibility and fluency: Handwriting is critical to the development of written expression, offering opportunities for students to engage in multisensory learning (Berninger & Wolf, 2009). The ease with which students write is the best predictor of length and quality at both the primary school level (Graham, Berninger, Abbott, & Whitaker, 1997) and secondary and college levels (Connelly, Campbell, MacLean, & Barnes, 2006). A functional writing system is one that can be executed with legibility and ease. Having a functional writing system, whether it be handwriting, keyboarding, or voice-to-text, is critical for the development of written expression (Wood, 2025; Center for Implementing Technology in Education, n.d.).

Students who experience difficulty controlling their pencils are at risk for writing disorders (Barnett, Connely, & Miller, 2020). Beginning in kindergarten, handwriting can be readily assessed, both formally and informally. Students who do not have a functional writing system by the end of first grade need to be provided with additional instruction, including a review of past classroom and intervention curricula and methods for writing. Formal measures of handwriting can be found on the WIAT-4 and the Feifer Assessment of Writing (Feifer & Nader, 2016). We can also learn about a student's handwriting skill informally by asking students to write the alphabet in upper and then in lowercase to assess handwriting automaticity. When assessing handwriting, both legibility and accuracy are important.
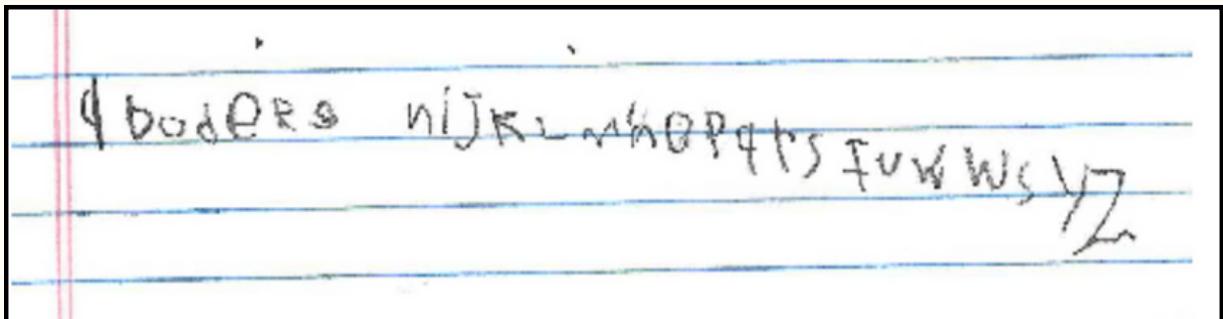
Sample of a written alphabet depicting difficulty with letter formation, orientation, and spacing, and alphabet sequence. *Photo courtesy of Melissa Farrall.*

When there are questions about whether a student's ability to write is sufficient to support the development of writing expression, consult your Assistive Technology Specialist. In some cases, it may be necessary to seek the expertise of an Occupational Therapist who may offer therapies and advice regarding the development of hand muscles to support fine motor skills.

Spelling words in a list and in context: Spelling has the capacity to take up a disproportionate amount of working memory and to disrupt the flow of written expression (Berninger, et al., 2006). For example, adults with dyslexia or have difficulty spelling rely more on single-syllable words than their peers, a style that may limit their ability to express themselves with precision and descriptive power (Sterling, Farmer, Riddick, Morgan, & Matthews, 1998).

Assessing spelling of words both in a list format and in context helps us identify skills that are in the process of development and those that have not yet been generalized for application. All norm-referenced tests of achievement (WJ-IV, WIAT-4, KTEA-3, etc.) include an assessment of a student's ability to spell words in a list. Progress monitoring tools for spelling may be found on AIMSweb Plus, easyCBM, Spellography, and the Spelling Inventory for *Words Their Way*.

In brief, spelling errors should be considered with respect to three main questions:
1. Are speech sounds represented accurately?
2. Is the spelling conventional?
3. Does the student have a command of word structure, specifically Latin prefixes, roots, and suffixes?

The answer to these questions will help determine areas for additional assessment and/or instruction. Dr. Bruce Rosow will present a more detailed discussion of spelling in next issue of Teaching Reading in Brief.

Compositional fluency: The ability to think on paper requires both a functional writing system and the flow of language, facts, concepts, and ideas. In particular, compositional fluency reflects skill with handwriting and spelling. Deficits in either of these areas will impair working memory and consume resources essential for the generation and organization of ideas. Graham and Berninger's research (1997) suggested that improvements in handwriting and spelling will result in improvements in writing output and quality. Formal measures of compositional fluency can be found on the WJ-IV, the WIAT-4, the PAL-II, and the TOWL-4, which are highlighted in the next table. Curriculum-based measures offer a variety of procedures for scoring writing samples (McMaster & Espin, 2007).

Paragraph writing is the product of a functional writing system, language abilities, knowledge of a given topic, critical-thinking skills, all executed within the domain of working memory/executive function. According to Berninger in the *Process Assessment of the Learner, Second Edition* (2007), there is much to be learned by examining a student's ability to structure and organize ideas in the context of a paragraph.

The coherence of a paragraph is best assessed by examining the use of different sentence types, the transition from one thought to the next, and the overall flow of logic. By way of example, the WIAT-4 offers a rubric that focuses on theme development and organization for those who wish to consider writing skills with respect to the quality of ideas and clarity of thought. The rubric, however, does not contribute to the standard score.

Ways of Measuring Skill and Progress

Jim Wright offers a wide range of progress-monitoring tools that can be adapted to facilitate classroom data collection on his website

Intervention Central (n.d.). These tools measure student progress by tracking aspects of written expression that are "countable," such as the total number of words written, the percentage of correctly spelled words, and correct word (writing) sequences per given unit of time. One method of progress monitoring, Correct Writing Sequences is worthwhile knowing; it is easy to use and provides an overall picture of writing quality over time. Briefly, a Correct Writing Sequence is a pair of words that are spelled correctly, use correct punctuation, follow rules for grammar and syntax, and are meaningful. The example below illustrates the process.
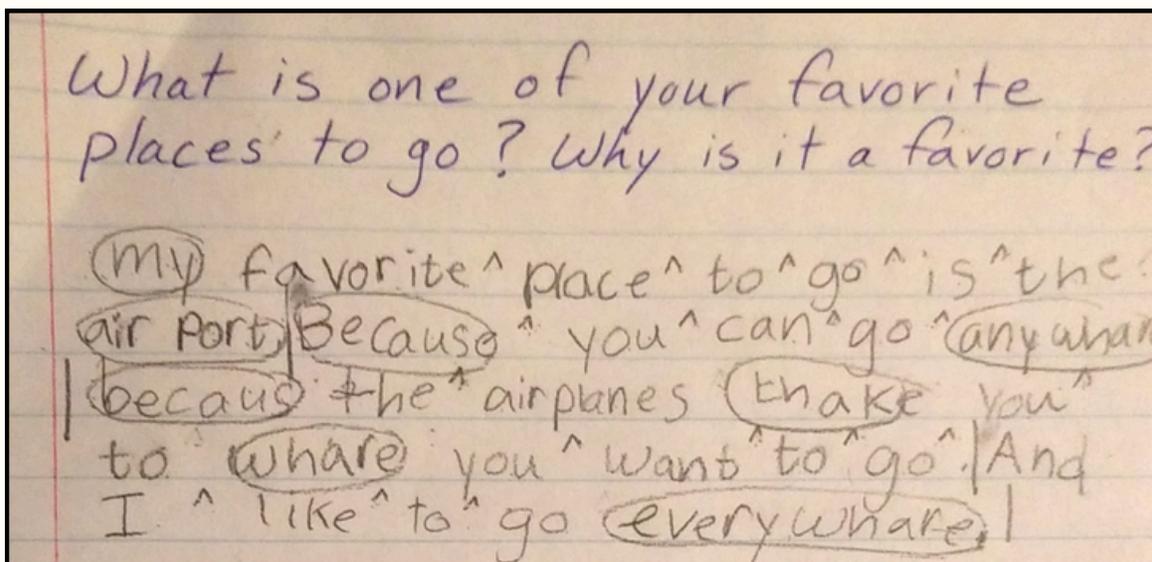
Steps for Correct Word Sequences

1. Have students complete a writing sample using a timed probe, typically 3 to 5 minutes in response to a story starter.

2. Break the sample into adjacent word pairs.

3. Examine each word pair to see that it is correctly spelled, correctly punctuated, grammatically acceptable, and meaningful. Word pairs that are correct are marked with a caret (^). Incorrect word pairs are circled or given an asterisk (*).

my * favorite
favorite ^ place
place ^ to
to ^ go
go ^ is
is ^ the
the* air port.

Total Number of Correct Word Sequences: 5

4. Total the number of correct word sequences (carets) per writing sample over time. Increases in this number reflect an overall improvement in writing quality.

Assessment of student writing using the Correct Word Sequence tool
Photo courtesy of Dorinne Dorfman

Tests Measuring Aspects of Written Expression		
Progress Monitoring Tools		
Test	**How Writing Is Assessed**	**Comments**
Acadience CBM Written Expression (Acadience Learning, 2021)	Progress monitoring tool administered by the classroom educator. Students respond to prompts and write for 3 minutes.	Scored based on the number of total words written and correct word sequences. Grades 1 - 8
AIMSweb Plus (Pearson, 2019)	Progress monitoring tool administered by the classroom educator. Students respond to prompts and write for 3 minutes.	Prompts are scored according to total words and correct-incorrect word sequences. Grades K through 8.
Intervention Central CBM Written Expression (n.d.)	Progress monitoring tool administered by the classroom educator. Students respond to a story prompt with 1 minute for planning and 3 minutes for writing.	Prompts are scored based on the total number of words written, correct word sequences, spelling, and grammar. Grades 1 – 8.

Standardized Norm-Referenced Tests		
Test	**How Writing Is Assessed**	**Comments**
Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement, Third Edition (KTEA-3; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2014)	Students are asked to complete a variety of tasks in the context of a story. Tasks include letter knowledge and formation, sentence formulation and combining, and summary writing. Spelling is not scored.	There are four levels to accommodate students of different grades (PreK-K, 1-2, 3-5, 6+). Age 4 - 25
Oral and Written Language Scales, Second Edition (OWLS-II; Carrow-Woolfolk, 2011)	Students are asked to execute a variety of discrete tasks, ranging from letter knowledge, sentence formulation and combining, narrative text, as well as expository (such as interpreting the data in a chart). Spelling and mechanics are scored.	The OWLS-2 offers the opportunity to examine different strands of the writing rope as a foundation for instructional recommendations. Five test levels: ages 5-7, 8-10, 11-13, 14-16, and 17-21

Standardized Norm-Referenced Tests		
Test	How Writing Is Assessed	Comments
Process Assessment of the Learner – Second Edition (PAL-II; Berninger, 2007)	Students perform tasks requiring skill with handwriting, spelling, and compositional fluency.	The test was designed with a focus on identifying dysgraphia and learning disabilities in written language. Grades K - 6
Test of Written Language, Fourth Edition (TOWL-4; Hammill & Larsen, 2009)	The TWOL-4 is structured into two sections: Contrived Writing (sentence length tasks) and Spontaneous Writing (a narrative). Contrived Writing tasks include vocabulary, spelling and punctuation, sentence combining, and editing logical sentences. The Spontaneous Writing task involves writing a story based on a picture prompt.	The TOWL-4 Spontaneous Writing Quotient scores high; it lacks the ability to determine progress over the short/long term. Only the Spelling subtest and the Story are scored for spelling. Grades 4 - 11
Wechsler Individual Achievement Test, Fourth Edition (WIAT-4; Breaux, 2020)	The WIAT-4 offers three options for documenting alphabet and sentence writing skill: (Alphabet Writing Fluency, Sentence Composition (Sentence Building and Sentence Combing) and Sentence Writing Fluency. It also offers an option for Essay Composition (grades 3+)	This test is unique in its capacity to measure handwriting ability in PreK through grade 4. The essay is scored by computer based on Correct-Incorrect-Word Sequencing calculation, which is sensitive to growth over the short term. Grades 3+
Woodcock-Johnson IV (WJ IV; Schrank, McGrew, Mather, Wendling, Dailey, 2014)	The WJ-IV measures Sentence Writing Fluency and Writing Samples (Labeling, filling in the blank, sentences based on pictures and written prompts, and sentence completion.	The WJ-IV measures sentence level skills only. Spelling is not scored. Ages 2 through 90+

Skill at the Sentence Level

An important, but often neglected skill in written expression is the ability to write using a variety of sentence structures. Sentences are the building blocks of paragraphs. Writing with a full complement of sentence structures permits us to relate facts, ideas, and concepts with sequence and logic. Formal tests of written expression may offer the opportunity to examine skill with sentence formulation based upon provided words; they may also permit us to examine tasks of sentence combining. The WIAT-4, for example, requires students to write sentences based upon word prompts, combine simple sentences into compound and complex sentences, and write sentences while being timed. Informally, we can document our students' use of different sentence structures by attending to and counting the number of simple, compound, and complex sentences. We can also calculate clause density; a higher clause density signifies more complex sentence structures, a sign that our student is writing with greater precision and descriptive power.

Clause Density = the Total Number of Clauses/Total Number of Sentences

If a student writes 4 sentences with a total of 9 clauses, the Clause Density equals 2.2. This number tells us that our student is writing sentences with multiple clauses. We would now want to examine actual writing samples to learn what types of compound and complex sentences were being used.

Closing

There is no single test that is perfect. All tests, whether used to monitor progress or in comprehensive evaluations, have their flaws. Standardized norm-reference tests permit us to understand a student's profile, think diagnostically, and analyze specific responses for the purpose of identifying underlying processing deficits and how to proceed instructionally. In contrast, progress-monitoring tools permit us to understand how students responds to instruction and, if learning progress is poor, then make changes to improvement, such as targeting underlying gaps, reducing group size, increasing the frequency, and lengthening the time devoted to instruction, intervention, and/or services. Although progress-monitoring tools are not designed to support efforts to dig down deep and understand where specific challenges lie, teachers highly trained in structured literacy can uncover and address specific gaps in phonemic awareness, alphabetics, and phonics.

Given the limitations of the tools that we use, we have to think seriously about the skills that we want to measure, and we have to be sure that these skills are addressed in our assessment. There is no one test that measures reading comprehension, oral language, or written expression comprehensively. In reading, we must think about the Simple View of Reading (Gough and Tunmer, 1986) and how to measure oral language and decoding skills. In writing, we need to consider aspects of the writing rope, including handwriting and spelling, oral language and style, syntax, text structures and critical thinking skills (Sedita, 2023).

In our efforts to collect data and document a student's profile, we do not want to forget our students as learners and human beings. For some, reading and writing are the hardest things that they have been asked to do. When we supplement our data with classroom work samples, we can understand the degree to which our students are able to use reading and writing as tools for learning.

Our responsibilities are clear. As educators, we must equip ourselves with deep knowledge of the structure of language, together with the underlying skills that make reading and writing possible. Having an understanding of the ways in which we can learn about our students, progress monitoring tools, standardized-normed testing, and work samples permits us to establish links between a student's strengths and weaknesses and what they require for instruction.

Answer to this issue's Curious Question:

Yes! Here is a sampling of some of the words that French has replaced in Anglo-Saxon.
But not all is lost; many of these original words can be found in Germanic languages today.

Modern English	Anglo-Saxon	German	Dutch
poor	earm	alm	arm
to reward	leanian	lohnen	belonen
praise	lof	Lob*	loven
air	lyft	Luft*	lucht
guilty	scyldig	schuldig	schuldig

*Nouns are capitalized in German.

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Meet the Writer and Editors

Dr. Melissa Farrall is the author of *Reading Assessment: Linking Language, Literacy, and Cognition*, and the co-author of *All About Tests & Assessments* published by Wrightslaw. Melissa Farrall recently retired as Director for Evaluation at the Stern Center for Language and Learning in Williston, Vermont. Melissa also held an appointment as a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Neurological Sciences at the Robert Larner College of Medicine at the University of Vermont where she trained medical professionals about learning disabilities and reading. She continues to train evaluators and teaches courses on the assessment of reading, writing, and language through the Stern Center and Vermont State University.

In the past, Melissa taught the structure of language and assessment in the Language and Literacy program at Simmons College in Boston, MA, and at The Reading Institute in Williamstown, MA. She worked as a learning disability specialist in the public schools for several years. Dr. Farrall received her doctorate from Brown University in 1981 in the area of Slavic Linguistics. She received her Master's Degree from Rivier College in Learning Disabilities in 1994, and her certification as a Specialist in the Assessment of Intellectual Functioning in 1999.

Dr. Brenda Warren has been studying and evaluating reading instruction for the past 20 years through three different lenses: as a pediatrician, school board member, and parent of a now-adult son with dyslexia. Her main interest has been examining how districts can overcome barriers preventing scientific reading research from fully impacting classroom practice, with a goal of ensuring that academic equity is present in our schools. In 2010, her work led her to pursue a doctorate in Education Leadership to study this topic in more depth. She graduated with her PhD in 2018. Her dissertation title is: *Closing the Science-to-Practice Gap for Reading Instruction: A Case Study of Two Schools Transitioning from Balanced Literacy to Scientifically Based Reading Instruction.*

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