

ASSESSING WRITING



Assessing Writing

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While many people write every day, either as part of their job or as a hobby, for others it's a distant memory of school days. Then again, it depends what we mean by *write*, doesn't it? It's true that we don't write many letters these days, but we do write things like emails, texts and social media posts all the time. So, maybe the kind of writing we do is changing. But most of us still write quite a lot.

When we write, there's a lot happening. We think about the topic and the way we need to make the message work. We also think about the audience we are hoping will read our ideas. Meanwhile we're forming a mental structure of the piece, as well as choosing suitable vocabulary and of course we put it all into a grammatically appropriate form so that the reader can make sense of exactly what we are trying to get across. All this passes down from the brain to the hand or fingers, where the message magically appears.

When we want to assess someone's ability to write, we should ask them to write something, but not just anything. The sort of writing task we set should be related to the decisions we plan to make about the person based on the work they produce. We must also take into consideration what we know about the test takers. There's little point in asking teenagers to write a business letter. We'll never know if the reason for their bad performance is due to poor writing ability or to lack of experience of business writing.

In the real world we write quite a few different kinds of things so, if we want to know about learners' overall writing ability, we really need to ask them to write a range of different things. We also need to think about how much writing is needed. For example, it's much easier to write a short note than a long essay. And we need to think about the audience, because we use very different language to write to a friend than when writing to our boss. Of course, there are lots of other things to consider when making a test, but we don't need to go in to all that now.

When the tasks have been agreed and people have written what we've asked them to write, we need to award a score. In large-scale tests, this is done by people who've been trained and accredited. In small-scale classroom tests, it's usually done by teachers, who rely on their experience to get it right.

Scoring is done using a rating scale. The scale can be global, or holistic, where a single number or grade is awarded. It can also be analytic, where separate scores or grades are awarded for different aspects of the work, for example, grammatical accuracy or range of

vocabulary. It's very important that the descriptions in the scale represent the kind of things that are relevant to the decisions we plan to make. So, asking the rater to consider the precision of the language in a personal email from one teenager to another is not such a good idea, since this type of writing is typically very casual.

There've been some interesting innovations recently in the way writing is scored, with a number of exam boards using computer-scoring programmes to complement the work of human raters. We can look forward to seeing more and more of this over the coming years.

On the surface, assessing writing ability seems pretty straightforward. Just ask people to write something and then give what they write a score. In fact, it's a lot more complicated than that, especially the scoring side. However, if we think systematically about as many of the things mentioned here as possible, then at least we can be certain that our tests are appropriate, fair and accurately scored.