

How to Evaluate Students' Writing

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Responsibility for a child's writing instruction is usually accompanied by an obligation to evaluate the child's writing. Such evaluation can be a daunting task. The following suggestions will help you give your child's writing the response it deserves and will also help you provide the feedback that will make your child a better writer.

The Reader's Mindset

Approach a piece of child's writing the same way you as a reader would approach any other piece of writing: First get the message. Determine what the young writer is trying to communicate.

On a second reading you might approach the piece more objectively. You are still reading to get the message, but try to divest yourself of all prior knowledge of the writer and the topic—rely solely on the written words.

Respond First to Content

Too often we tend to zero in on mechanical errors such as those involving spelling or punctuation. Mechanical issues are objective; most of them have a clear right and wrong; they can be dealt with quickly and conclusively. Content issues, on the other hand, are more subjective; they have nuances; they beget additional issues and often seem to defy resolution.

Nevertheless, it is vital to address content issues first, to respond to the writer's message. If you were reading a love letter or a suicide note, would you suggest mechanical corrections before you responded to content? Although young writers will almost certainly have topics other than these, they ought to be writing about things that are important to them. Take time to state the message that you got from the piece of writing: for example, "I can tell that Nana's kitchen is a very special place to you."

A good next step is to be more specific about what made the content effective: for example, "You've described the sights and sounds—and smells!—so vividly that I felt I was there myself." You might even want to put some of these comments in writing.

From here, it's easy to identify other techniques that made the content effective—and perhaps mention one or two things that could have made it even *more* effective. *Don't mention everything here.* The writer won't remember it all and will instead be discouraged by how far short of perfection the writing has fallen. Select one or two things that the writer seems "ready" to incorporate into his or her writing.

Four Broad Categories

Once you have responded to the writing, you are likely to feel that you should evaluate it. An easy way to begin is to place the piece of writing into one of the following four categories.

Incomprehensible: Due to serious problems with content and/or mechanics, the message simply cannot be understood.

Understandable: Although the message may contain many errors of various kinds, the basic point seems clear. This is a good start for any writer.

Favorable: In addition to having a message that seems clear, the writing gives a favorable impression. Content is probably well organized and well supported; mechanical errors are probably few. All writers should strive to reach this level.

Eloquent/Profound: Not only does the clear message create a favorable impression, something about the content, word choice, sentence structure, figurative language, etc. moves the reader to “Wow!” *Mechanical correctness alone cannot carry a piece of writing to this level.*

Distribution of student writing into these four categories is likely to produce a bell curve. Most pieces of writing will fit into one of the two middle groups; few will be in the top or bottom group.

Questions to Help You Evaluate Content

The four categories above are quite broad. The following specific questions will help parents or teachers guide students toward the “Favorable” level. Approach the questions in the mindset of the objective reader who has divested himself or herself of privileged knowledge about the writer and topic.

- Does the composition effectively capture interest?
- Does the composition make sense?
- Is the composition clear? Are any parts confusing?
- Is the composition organized logically? Does it maintain interest? Are ideas supported and developed? Are transition words used to help readers see how ideas are related?
- Can you identify a main idea that pervades the composition? (You might check with the author to see if the idea you detected was the same one the author was trying to communicate.)
- Does everything in the composition contribute to this main idea? Should anything be deleted because it is irrelevant? Does the ending of the composition leave the reader with a final impression that reinforces this main idea?
- Does the composition use concrete images that bring the composition to life? (This is effective for non-fiction as well as fiction.)

- Does the composition use precise vocabulary? Is the student correctly using words that stretch beyond his or her everyday vocabulary?
- If there was a specific assignment (regarding length, topic, etc.), does the composition fulfill all of the requirements?
- Does the composition “flow” when read aloud? Do the sentences have effective variety?
- Does the piece have an appropriate title that generates interest?

Questions to Help You Evaluate Mechanics

Once you have responded to the content of the piece of writing and evaluated its effectiveness, you are ready to examine mechanical correctness. As in your evaluation of the content, don't point out *all* of the errors. Focus on a few things that your child seems ready to learn. The following questions suggest things to look for.

- Are sentences complete? Does each sentence begin with a capital letter and end with the appropriate punctuation mark?
- Are paragraph breaks effective?
- Do subjects and verbs agree in number (both singular or both plural)?
- Are other verbs, pronouns, and modifiers used in the correct form?
- Is capitalization used appropriately?
- Are commas and other punctuation marks used correctly?
- Does the paper have adequate margins?
- Has appropriate credit been given for ideas that are not original?

An English handbook will provide access to information that will help you answer these questions and will help your children achieve correctness in their writing.

Standardized Writing Assessments

Considering the way standardized writing assessments evaluate writing can suggest other ways for you to examine your child's writing.

Many standardized writing assessments, such as the ERB (Educational Records Bureau), the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test), or state writing assessments, evaluate compositions on the following six criteria:

Topic Development
Organization
Support
Sentence Structure
Word Choice
Mechanics

The ERB and SAT evaluate compositions on a 6-point scale, 1 being the lowest score and 6 being the highest. The ERB evaluates each criterion individually. The SAT, however, uses holistic scoring, the consideration of all criteria resulting in one numerical score. Regardless of whether the criteria are evaluated individually or holistically, assessors are provided with descriptions of student writing and anchor papers that exemplify each score. Assessors might consider, for example, whether they would put a paper in the upper half or the lower half of student papers (to distinguish between a 3 and a 4), or whether they would put the paper in the upper third or the middle third (to distinguish between a 4 and a 5).

Standardized writing assessments rely on a rubric, which describes the criteria on which the paper will be evaluated. A rubric can be presented to the student when an assignment is made, thus delineating expectations. When the writing is completed, the rubric can guide the teacher in evaluation—and can even provide a tool for the student to evaluate his or her own writing. A number of rubrics—and sites for helping you develop your own rubrics—are available on the Internet. This one has a variety of good examples: www.kathimitchell.com/rubric.html .

Whether you evaluate your child’s writing formally with a rubric or informally with questions, be sure to respond to the content of the piece of writing as a *reader*. Knowing that his or her message was received by another human being can go a long way toward inspiring your child to communicate effectively in the future.

Biographical Information

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Fran Santoro Hamilton’s thirty-five years as teacher, writer, and editor have enabled her to distill the English language to its essentials. Fran is the author of Hands-On English, an English handbook that makes grammar visual, and she cosponsors The Grannie Annie Family Story Celebration. Fran provides many free resources at www.GrammarAndMore.com.