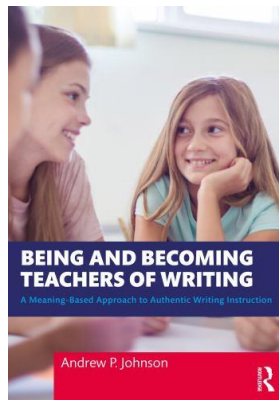


CHAPTER 29: ASSESSING WRITING -- WHAT DOESN'T WORK, BUT IS USED ANYWAY

Andrew P. Johnson, Ph.D.
 Distinguished Faculty Scholar
 Professor, Literacy Instruction
 Minnesota State University
Email: andrew.johnson@mnsu.edu

This is an excerpt from my book, Johnson, A. (2024). [Being and becoming teachers of writing: A meaning-based approach](#). Routledge. It should be out in March or 2024.



A pig doesn't get heavier by weighing it. Students don't become better readers and writers by assessing them. But yet we continue to waste millions of dollars and countless hours on standardized tests that do nothing to tell us exactly what we should be teaching and how it should be taught. Why is this so?

WHY

The 'why' questions don't get asked often enough. Why do we assess? For what purpose? In terms of writing, I hope the answer is this: We assess to determine strengths to build upon and weaknesses to address. We assess to document growth. But ultimately, we assess to find out what we can do to help students become better writers. If not, we're wasting our time.

Too often assessment is used to "*hold teachers accountable*". Ugh. Why is it that some groups continue to wage this war against teachers? Why do some insist on the de-professionalization of education? We want intelligent, creative teachers to enter the field – but then we treat them like young, way-ward adolescents. We don't trust them. We tell them what they must teach and how they must teach it. And then we use standardized tests to hold them accountable. Maybe we should give them a curfew as well. That's it, let's give all teachers a curfew and a mandatory bedtime – and restrict their TV watching and phone access if test scores fall below a certain percentage. Yeah, that's the ticket.

What happens when standardized tests are used to hold teachers accountable? Instead of testing what's taught, teachers teach what's tested. This is called ass-backwards in some circles, utter clownery in other circles. With such ass-backward clownery, the curriculum becomes narrowed, focusing only on that which can be measured and quantified by an external entity, the exam writers. How is it possible for teachers to be creative and innovative if the only learning that's valued is that which can be quantified by a stink'n standardized test? How is it possible to meet students' individual needs and interests of your class if the test manufacturer, who knows nothing of your students, is dictating what's taught?

Tests of Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar

The advantage of standardized tests is that they're easy to administer and score. Open up the package, read the directions, and apply. A whole bunch of students can all sit down simultaneously at the same time and within a short time testing is completed. Learning is quantified. Students' distance from average is documented.

The disadvantage of standardized tests is that they measure only that which can be measured by standardized tests. Here spelling, punctuation, and grammar are measured using multiple-choice or true/false questions. The problem is that's not writing.

Writing Tests

Writing tests are different from standardized tests. Here students are given a writing prompt and a piece of paper to do some pre-writing thinking before writing. They then have a time limit in which to write (anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes). These are then either computer scored or sent off to be rated and scored by trained raters. Writing tests are better than standardized tests; however, the validity of these should be questioned. It's not what real writers do when they write (hopefully). Hence, it's an artificial writing situation being measured by an artificial writing measure.

Thus said, it would be very easy to make the scores go up on these artificial writing measures. Just teach children to perform like trained seals at the circus. To train student/seals, first break the artificial writing down into steps and teach with guided and independent practice. Then create a lot of artificial writing experiences with artificial writing prompts and artificial time limits. Next, have a lot of artificial writing practice. And finally, spend time talking about artificial writing and how to get better at artificial writing. Easy-peasy. Maybe we could teach students to balance a ball on their nose at the same time? That'd be a really neat trick. But do we really want students to perform like trained seals on some cockamamie writing assessment? Or do we want students to be able to think and write? Sometimes I wonder.

6+1 Traits of Writing

In her book, *6+1 traits of writing*, Ruth Culham (2005) recommends that writing be taught by focusing on seven traits (see Figure 29.1). Here each trait is taught separately. Rubrics are then used to assess students' writing based on the seven traits. On these rubrics the seven traits are listed on a vertical axis and descriptions of five levels of each trait are listed on a horizontal axis (see Figure 29.2). To assess you simply look at students' writing and assign them a number for each trait based on the rubric description. Better writing through rubrics, yes?

No.

Figure 29.1. Culham's 6+1 traits of writing.

1. Ideas: the meaning and development of the message.
2. Organization: the internal structure of the piece.
3. Voice: the tone of the piece – the personal stamp that the writing brings to it.
4. Word choice: the specific vocabulary the writer uses to convey meaning.
5. Sentence fluency: the way the words and phrases flow throughout the text.
6. Conventions: the mechanical correctness of the piece.
7. Presentation: the overall appearance of the work.

The problem with the 6+1 traits is that the focus is on the product (or traits) and not on the process. The traits then become the writing program (Routeman 2005). And who decided that these traits were important? Do they know your students? Do these traits reflect the real world writing that real writers use in the real world? I'm a real writer. As I'm writing this chapter, I'm looking back at Culham's 6+1 traits. The traits just don't fit. In fact, in my professional life, this other-worldly list of traits doesn't fit with any of the letters, memos, emails, articles, reports, or books that I've had to write.

OVER-RUBICIZED

What's the deal with rubrics? You look at the product or a performance you are trying to teach, define three to six traits of that a good product or performance would have, then you describe three or five levels of each trait. For example, given a particular trait, this is what a rating of 4 would look like, a rating of 3, a rating of 2, and a rating of 1 or 0 (see Figure 29.2). You then compare the product or performance to each trait and find the number level that seems to match. Simple as that.

Figure 29.2. Stink'n rubric template.

	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
Trait 1				
Trait 2				
Trait 3				
Trait 4				

We've become over-rubricized. We got ourselves a bad case of ruber-I-tiss. And the stink'n rubrics do little to move us forward in our teaching ... They also do little to move students forward in their writing. But since stink'n rubrics generate numbers, and since the number monkeys love numbers, stink'n rubrics continue to exist.

I want you to know that there was educational life before rubrics. It was a wonderful life. We taught stuff and children learned stuff and life was good. But then the number monkeys began to creep into education. "*Nothing exists,*" they said, "*if it can be quantified.*" So, the number monkeys threw down their bananas and invented the rubric. Rubrics enabled them to put numbers

to things and enumerate our students and quantify their learning. They could point their monkey fingers and say, “*that’s an 19 .. and that’s a 16. 19 is better than 16 so that one is better than the other one*”. Then they’d screech and shake their arms above their heads in great joy.

And if the average writing rubric score in one class was 19 and the average writing rubric score in another was 16, the number monkeys would conclude one teacher was doing a better job of teaching than the other. “*We’ve got to hold teachers accountable,*” they would say. “*We’ve got to get those 16s up to 19s. Everybody has got to be a 19.*” They monkeys would then insist that the school should invest in commercial writing programs guaranteed to raise writing test scores.

What’s Wrong With Stink’n Rubrics

Now there’s nothing inherently wrong with an occasional rubric, as long as we recognize its limitations:

1. They are too complex and cumbersome to be of any use. It takes time to figure out what exactly constitutes each level of performance with each trait. Then, evaluating and deciding if it’s one level or another takes additional time. The cost-reward is high in terms of time and useful feedback.

2. They give the illusion of objectivity. We think because it’s described with a number, that it’s more objective. You just match the writing to the trait, right? But often, students’ writing will meet only some of the traits at one level and some at another level. Then what do you do? And who defines the traits and the levels of each trait?

3. As mentioned above, the focus becomes the writing traits or writing product and not the writing process.

4. A rubric often creates a distorted version of the performance they are trying to capture. In writing they never capture the full range of what writers do.

5. Rubrics focus on the micro instead of the macro. It is assumed that by putting all the little micro rubric traits together, that students will have an excellent macro product or performance. This is called part-to-whole learning. However, this is NOT how we learn complex things most effectively. As stated previously in this book, whole-to-part learning has been shown to be more effective for learning complex skills like writing (Lim, Reiser, & Olina, 2009).

WHY AGAIN

This brings us back to THE ‘why’ question. Why are standardized tests, writing tests, and rubrics being misused and overused? This is a question for which I have no answer. These bits of silliness seem to cling like wood ticks onto our educational body. The next chapter will present some healthy alternatives.

Figure 29.3. Examples of rubrics for writing.

Trait	4 Expert	3 Accomplished	2 Capable	1 Beginner
Quality of writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piece was written in an extraordinary style and voice. • Very informative and well organized. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piece was written in an interesting style and voice • Somewhat informative and organized. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piece had little style or voice • Gives some new information but poorly organized. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piece had no style or voice. • Gives no new information and was very poorly organized.
Topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly introduces the topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduces the topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduces topic but focus is unclear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic is unclear
Expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses effective language • Uses high-level vocabulary • Use of sentence variety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse word choice • Uses descriptive words • Sentence variety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited word choice • Basic sentence structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No sense of sentence structure
Grammar, Usage, & Mechanics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtually no spelling, punctuation, or grammar errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few spelling and punctuation errors, minor grammatical errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of spelling, punctuation, or grammar errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So many spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors that it interferes with the meaning.

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