
USING MESSAGE LEVEL CRITERIA TO EVALUATE PRIMARY WRITING

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In April of three successive years, we collected writing samples from all English and French Immersion primary classes, about sixteen hundred samples in all. Students wrote according to procedures that are consistent with a process approach to writing. At least two persons evaluated the samples using a six-point scale, which focuses on the message level of the writing, i.e. on the child's success in conveying meaning.

Evaluators agreed on the message level in 65% of samples in grade one, 63% in grade two, 52% in grade three, with no more than one level of disagreement in 94%-99% of the samples (depending on grade level). The writing scale appears valid in that the percentage of writing samples at the different levels moves up the scale from grade one, to grade two, to grade three, with more than a third of grade three samples meeting criteria at the 5 - 6 end of the scale.

Evaluators drew a number of other conclusions from the study: most students have no difficulty choosing a topic; interesting samples were written by students from all schools, regardless of socioeconomic level; boys as well as girls produce top level writing; students do not make revisions unless they write on every second line; and opportunities to share writing with others are critical in fostering writing development.

Classroom teachers use the writing scale to evaluate the content of a student's file, not to mark individual pieces of writing. Half-a-day's practice with the scale is sufficient to make teachers comfortable with its use.