

Writing Assessment guide

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Assessment criteria

The purpose of this support material is to give teachers information about the twelve criteria used to assess ARB writing exemplars. The assessment focus of each criterion is given¹, as are selected examples of what to look for as you assess against each criterion.

A glossary of terms used in this guide is provided².

The 12 criteria:

Purpose and audience

1. Orientation and engagement
2. Text structure
3. Register

Content

4. Ideas
5. Vocabulary

Organisation

6. Paragraphing

Conventions

7. Sentence structure
 8. Word structure
 9. Connecting and tracking ideas in text
 10. Sentence punctuation
 11. Punctuation within sentences
 12. Spelling
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Purpose and audience

1. Orientation and engagement

Assessment focus

The writer's sense of their readers: the capacity to orient and engage readers through the considered use of information, text structure, and language features.

Look for evidence that suggests:

- the writer is aware that the reader has a practical need for: clear expression, enough information, and a text structure and language features appropriate to the purpose and audience.
- the writer is aware that the reader has affective and cognitive needs for: writing that "hooks" them in from the beginning, writing that is original rather than clichéd and familiar, writing that affects or moves them emotionally and/or intellectually, and writing that has voice.³

2. Text structure

Assessment focus

The writer's sense of how writing is organised in regular ways according to purpose. Look for

evidence that suggests:

- the writer is aware that we write in regular ways. For example, recounts are typically used when the purpose is to tell what happened. They typically begin with an orientation which is followed by a chronologically ordered series of events. At various points there may be personal comments.
- the writer is aware that regular text structure is adapted to meet the needs of each situation. This may involve mixing text types within one piece of writing, rearranging the typical organization etc. (Look for: purposeful innovation – an indication of adaptability and strategic thinking and therefore a high degree of control.)

3. Register

Assessment focus

The writer's sense of the appropriateness of their language features to their audience and subject matter. Look for evidence that suggests:

- the writer is aware that the roles and relationship of the writer and reader will determine the language features used.
 - When a situation requires an informal text, the writer makes language choices which are likely to include: non-standard vocabulary (slang), contractions, abbreviated sentences (for example, Read any good books lately?), first and second person pronouns, and language expressing feelings and opinions. When the situation requires formality, for example, an academic article written by a subject expert for other experts in the field, language choices are likely to include: technical vocabulary, academic vocabulary, facts, and objective language.
- the writer is aware that the subject-matter of the text will determine the language features used:
 - The subject-matter is the doings and happenings (what is going on), who or what is involved (the participants), and the circumstances in which they are taking place (where and when). If the subject matter is everyday, the writer makes language choices which are likely to include the personal and the particular – familiar objects, relationships, and environments, and specific incidents. If the subject-matter is beyond the everyday, the writer makes language choices which are likely to include generalisation and abstraction, for example, reference to: societies, weather patterns, and volcanic regions.
- the writer is aware that language features are tools or resources that should be used flexibly to meet the needs of each situation. (Look for: purposeful innovation – an indication of adaptability and strategic thinking and therefore a high degree of control.)

Content

4. Ideas

Assessment focuses:

The writer's sense of the need for ideas to be: relevant, sufficient, coherent, and elaborated. The writer's sense of the appropriate use of abstraction and concretion. Look for evidence that suggests:

- the writer is aware that meaning-making is a cumulative process – an idea is stated, then elaborated upon so the reader can build meaning.
- the writer is aware that abstraction is used to name ideas in non-fiction texts, for example, in an opening general statement or paragraph topic sentence. Abstract ideas enable writers to move beyond their personal circumstances and reflect upon the world but writers need to be aware that the meanings of abstract ideas are imprecise and so examples of those ideas, that is, concretion, will need to be used alongside abstraction. For example, the first paragraph below is an opening general statement and the second begins with a paragraph topic sentence which is followed by concrete examples:

Changes of State

An important idea in science is that nothing can be created or destroyed although things can be changed. Some changes are permanent, others are temporary. Temporary changes include “changes of state”. For example, water can exist in different states. It can be in a solid state (ice), a liquid state (water), or a gas (water vapour)....

- the writer is aware that abstraction is rarely used in fiction except when there is a need to convey information quickly, for example: Rebecca was pleased about the baby coming home. Writers need to be aware that the use of abstraction in fiction denies the reader the opportunity to infer, to come to their own conclusions about, for example, how a character might be feeling.

When writing fiction, concretion is used extensively to create precise images. For example, a young girl tentatively explores the contents of her grandmother’s dressing table: Reaching to the back, just under the mirror, she picked up the bottle of green smelling salts. She pulled out the stopper and gently sniffed. The ammonia made her eyes run. (Keir, p.30)

5. Vocabulary

Assessment focuses:

The writer’s sense of the use of words for artistic impact. The writer’s sense of the use of technical and academic words. The writer’s sense of the typical use of words within genres. Look for evidence that suggests:

- the writer is aware that we experience the world through our senses – through what we taste, touch, hear, smell, and see. Writing, therefore, must contain sensuous detail. For example, a young girl contemplates the last jar of honey made by her recently deceased grandfather:
Mum had spread my toast with the last of Grandad's honey. The empty jar was on the bench with the light shining through it. My eyes filled with tears. (Wootton, p. 15)
- the writer is aware that metaphors and similes can bring writing to life.
Stale metaphors and similes will drag your work down, but good ones will give it real zing. (Lowry, p. 64)
- the writer is aware that adverbs should be used with caution.
Using too many adverbs makes for flabby writing. Please never have a character laugh mischievously, or cry sadly.... (Lowry, p. 56)
- the writer is aware that technical words add specificity and precision.
- the writer is aware that academic words take writing beyond the everyday and into the world of formal study.
- the writer is aware that each genre uses words in distinctive ways. For example, explanations typically include verbs to express the action.

Organisation

6. Paragraphing

Assessment focus:

The writer’s sense of the organisation of ideas. Look for evidence that suggests:

- the writer is aware that like ideas are grouped together.
- the writer is aware that paragraphs are arranged to support the structure of the text type (e.g., a narrative will begin with an orientation and an argument will conclude with a summary).
- the writer is aware that paragraph topic sentences orient the reader in many informational texts.
- the writer is aware that paragraphs are ordered logically (e.g., a recount will be ordered chronologically and an explanation will have a sequenced account of how/why something occurs).

Conventions

7. Sentence structure ⁴

Assessment focus:

The writer's sense of the arrangement of, and relationship among, the words that form sentences.

Look for evidence that suggests:

- the writer is aware that sentences are structured differently according to which genre and curriculum area the writer is working within. For example, the language used in a science explanation is condensed and the focus is on the action rather than on the person or thing doing the action. See **Nominalisation** and **Passive voice**.
- the writer is aware that a variety of sentence types (e.g., simple, compound, and complex) are used to convey a variety of ideas. See **Types of sentences**.
- the writer is aware that information is added to a sentence to enrich or add precision to the message. See **Adding information to a sentence**.
- the writer is aware that their language needs to reflect the patterns of written English ⁵. For example:
 - A singular subject takes a singular verb, e.g., Tom rides his bike to work (Tom is a singular subject; rides is a singular verb) and a plural subject takes a plural verb e.g., The boys are climbing the walls (the boys is a plural subject; are climbing is a plural verb). An example of a subject-verb pattern error is: The arrival of the latest fashions have excited all the Christmas shoppers (The arrival is a singular subject; have excited is a plural verb). This sentence should read: The arrival of the latest fashions has excited all the Christmas shoppers).
 - The tense marking the time at which a particular action takes place needs to be consistent. For example, the following two sentences are consistently written in the present tense: I slouch on the hard chair, trying to fall asleep. It's no use, I just can't fall asleep. An example of a verb error where a particular action takes place in both the present and the past is: I slouch on the hard chair, trying to fall asleep. It was no use, I just couldn't fall asleep.
 - There are several types of pronouns with each expressing a different meaning. For example, personal pronouns are the main means of identifying speakers, addressees, and others: I, you, he, she, it, we, they, and possessive pronouns express ownership: my car, this is mine, her car, hers is over there. An example of a pronoun error where, instead of a possessive pronoun, a personal one is used is: Do they parents know?
 - There are 3 concepts involved in the article system: the definite article (the), the indefinite article (a or an) and the absence of an article. The definite article allows us to think about nouns in a specific way, referring to individuals: the dog is eating; the indefinite article allows us to refer to a general class or species: a dog is an interesting animal. The article is often omitted in idiomatic usage: go to bed. An example of an article error where one is used but is inappropriate is: I'm going to the bed now.
- the writer is aware that their language needs to reflect the rhythms of written English. Writing needs to have a steady rhythm and should not be marked by abrupt transitions, i.e., it should not feel "jerky", nor should it feel ponderous (unless a very skilled writer intends a short piece of text to feel jerky or ponderous for a particular effect.) Writing should have a certain rhythmical "neatness" about it.

8. Word structure

Assessment focus:

The writer's sense of the parts of words that have meaning. Look for evidence that suggests:

- the writer is aware that in a sentence such as The results of the meeting shocked the campaigners, most of the words can be analysed into further parts, each of which has some kind of independent meaning (Crystal, 2006, p. 237). For example:
 - results: result + an ending, -s, which turns a singular noun into plural
 - meeting: meet + an ending, -ing, which turns a verb into a noun

- shocked: shock + and ending. -ed, which turns the present tense of a verb into a past tense
- campaigners: campaign + an ending, -er which turns an abstract noun into an agentive noun ('someone who campaigns'), and another ending, -s, which turns a singular noun into a plural

An example of a word-part error where -ed should be added to shock to indicate past tense and -s should be added to result to indicate a pluralis: I was very shock by the result.

- the writer is aware that not all words conform to regular patterns. For example: The normal past tense ending (-ed, as in I walked) is replaced by an unpredictable irregular verb (I took, went, saw, etc.)

9. Connecting and tracking ideas in text

Assessment focus:

The writer's sense of the words used to link ideas within sentences and the words used to link ideas within and between sentences. Look for evidence that suggests:

- the writer is aware that conjunctions are used to link clauses within a sentence and that different types of conjunctions are used to express different types of relationships between ideas. For example: There will be caterpillars on this plant because there are lots of holes in the leaves; Overall the planet is getting warmer, even though some places have experienced drops in temperature. See The words used to link ideas within a sentence.
- the writer is aware that cohesive devices and the clause theme are used to link ideas within and between sentences. See The words used to link ideas within and between sentences .

10. Sentence punctuation

Assessment focus:

The writer's sense of the marks used to separate words into sentences to make meaning clear.

Look for evidence that suggests:

- the writer is aware that a capital letter is used at the beginning of a sentence and a full stop, exclamation mark, or question mark is used at the end.

11. Punctuation within sentences

Assessment focus:

The writer's sense of the marks used to separate letters, words, phrases, and clauses to make meaning clear. The writer's sense of the use of capital letters within a sentence. Look for evidence that suggests:

- the writer is aware that commas can be used to mark clauses⁶ and phrases. They are used in lists, and in direct speech where they are usually written at the end of a statement before the speech marks⁷: "Now Hannah, I'm relying on you to look after your sister," Mum says.
- the writer is aware that apostrophes are used for possession: Sally's chair (singular, i.e., one girl); The boys' room (plural, i.e., two or more boys); and apostrophes are used in contractions: don't, I'll, would've.
- the writer is aware that colons are used to (rather theatrically) announce what is to come: This much is clear: she will have to go.
- the writer is aware that semicolons are used to indicate that something needs to be added. With a semicolon: you get a pleasant feeling of expectancy; there is more to come; read on; it will get clearer. (Truss, 2003, p. 114)
- the writer is aware that direct speech is indicated by the use of speech marks: "Now Hannah, I'm relying on you to look after your sister," Mum says.
- the writer is aware that ellipsis dots are used to indicate that words have been omitted from the original text. They are also used to indicate a pause in speech or an unfinished thought: "Your father was going to take the first week off work but someone at work is having an operation and ... he's very sorry."
- The writer is aware that some nouns are capitalised, e.g., names, titles, places, days of the week, and months.

12. Spelling ⁸

Assessment focus:

The writer's sense of the way sounds are written as letters. The writer's sense of letter order. Look for evidence that suggests:

- the writer is aware of the variety of ways sounds are written as letters, for example, blends -bl, consonant digraphs -sh, vowel digraphs -ea etc.
- the writer is aware of the spelling of high frequency words.
- the writer is aware that some high frequency words have irregular spelling: through, rough, know, love etc.
- the writer is aware of more difficult spelling patterns: -eous (hideous), -uage (language), -shion (cushion), -iour (behaviour), -tious (ambitious), -cious (conscious), -tain (mountain), -el (label), -ible (possible), -able (comfortable) etc.

Glossary

- **Abstraction:** Existing in thought but not having a physical or concrete existence, for example, love, freedom, beauty. Not based on a particular instance; theoretical; not concrete.
- **Academic vocabulary:** Words which are common to a range of academic disciplines: analyse, concept, interpret.
- **Active voice:** When subject is the doer of the action. We [subject] mixed the baking soda and vinegar [verb]. (Compare with the **passive voice**)
- **Adverb:** A word whose main function is to specify the kind of action expressed by a verb: He spoke angrily.
- **Affective:** Relating to moods, feelings, and attitudes.
- **Article:** A word that specifies whether a noun is definite (the) or indefinite (a or an).
- **Clause:** A grammatical structure in which several components of meaning are brought together to form a message. The verb is the essential element of any clause: ... the big dogs enjoyed their unexpected bones ...
- **Clause theme:** The clause theme tells us what the clause is about. It is a signpost saying to the reader: "this is what I want you to pay attention to."
- **Cliché:** A phrase that is overused, and so indicates a lack of original thought: It was the calm before the storm.
- **Cognitive:** Relating to cognition – the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge or understanding.
- **Coherence:** The quality of being logical and consistent.
- **Cohesive devices:** The words used to make links between various items in a text so that the reader is able to track how meaning is being developed.
- **Conjunction:** The words used to link clauses within a sentence: I came because I needed to see you.
- **Comma splice:** The use of a comma to join two **independent clauses** instead of connecting them by a **conjunction, semicolon, or full stop**: It is nearly half past five, we cannot reach town before dark.
- **Concretion:** Existing in a material or physical form; specific; definite; not abstract.
- **Digraph:** Two letters representing one sound: -th, -ng, -ee, -ou.
- **Direct speech:** What is actually said by someone.
- **Elaborate:** To add more detail concerning what has already been said.
- **Engage:** To occupy or attract someone's interest or attention. (Compare with the definition of "engaging" – charming and attractive.) **Idiom:** A sequence of words that is a unit of meaning. The meaning of such an expression cannot be deduced by examining the meaning of the words and the expression is fixed: kicked the bucket means "die"; put a sock in it! means "stop talking".
- **Independent clause:** A clause capable of standing on its own and conveying a message. The following sentence has two independent clauses: She ran to school / and threw her bag down in the corridor. The following sentence has an independent clause followed by a dependent clause: They smiled / as if they meant it.
- **Metaphor:** A metaphor links something to something else imaginatively: the big bowl of the sky. (Lowry,

p. 64)

- Noun: A word class with a naming function: the cat, a dream.
- Noun phrase: A phrase with a noun as head: The tall man in a hat.
- Opening general statement: Usually 1-3 sentences at the beginning of the text that introduces the overall idea being written about across the text as a whole.
- Orient: To guide or familiarise.
- Objective language: Language which does not focus on thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Third person pronouns are reasonably common but first and second are not.
- Paragraph topic sentence: The first and most general sentence of a paragraph that introduces the overall idea being written about across the paragraph.
- Passive voice: When the subject receives the action, i.e., the subject is the target of the action Baking soda and vinegar [subject] were mixed [verb]. (Compare with the active voice)
- Personal pronouns: The main means of identifying speakers, addressees, and others. First person pronouns (speaking): I, me, we, us; second person pronouns (spoken to): you; third person pronouns (spoken of): he, she, it, him, her, they, them.
- Phrase: A cluster of words smaller than a clause, forming a grammatical unit: the tall trees; in a box.
- Pronoun: An item that can substitute for a noun: I've got a red hat and Jane's got a green one; or a noun phrase: My Uncle Fred's just arrived. He's quite tired.
- Semicolon: the punctuation mark used between two clauses which are related in meaning: I am going home; I intend to stay there.
- Simile: A simile compares something to something else. It is indicated by the use of the words like or as: Her smile was like a watermelon; The day was smooth as silk. (Lowry, p. 66)
- Technical vocabulary: Words which are specific to a particular topic, field, or academic discipline: dorsal fin; run-off pollution; periodic table.
- Voice: The author's style, the quality that makes his or her writing unique, and which conveys the author's attitude, personality, and character.

References and recommended reading

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¹ Note that when assessing against a particular criterion, the marker must be clear of the focus of that criterion and must assess against that criterion only.

² Note that this support material frequently links to another, **Thinking About How Language Works** which gives more detail in terms of the Conventions criteria.

³ Note that no two people will respond to a piece of writing in exactly the same way. However, the process of moderation will reveal where the majority of markers sit (for example, on the degree of emotional engagement a narrative elicits/draws from them). For reporting purposes, it is suggested that a marker whose response is outside that of the majority should modify their response to be in line with the majority.

⁴ Note that this criterion is not about punctuation. The focus is the writer's awareness of how words are combined in written English – a writer can have a good grasp of how words work together and not be able to punctuate sentences. For example, beginning writers often include large round full stops at the end of each line, and more experienced writers often misuse commas but, if the reader ignores the misused punctuation, it can become clear that the writer does know how words work together in sentences. The most important thing here is the degree to which the writer has an “ear” for written English, the degree to which they know what fluent written language “sounds” like. If punctuation is missing or misused, “read it in” to the correct place, i.e., mentally or physically add it to the piece of writing to help you understand the writer's sense of the patterns of written English. (But do not “read in” a missing word, unless you are sure it is simply an editing error, because missing words are likely to indicate a writer does not have a sense of the way words are arranged.) Note that any misused punctuation will be assessed against the two punctuation criteria (10 & 11).

⁵ Note that this criterion is not about absolutely “correct” grammar as may have been described in a traditional grammar textbook. A more modern approach is to focus on usage, on how most people (New Zealanders) would use language within a particular context. If grammar reflects common usage, accept it.

⁶ Note that there is disagreement about the use of comma splices. Some believe they should never be used, while others believe they can be used successfully for poetic effect: I came, I saw, I conquered. Experimental use of comma splices by inexperienced writers is almost always clumsy. When use is clumsy, assess it accordingly.

⁷ Note that New Zealand usage prefers speech marks after other punctuation marks (in this case, a comma): “Now Hannah, I'm relying on you to look after your sister,” Mum says. Sometimes, however, speech marks are written before other punctuation marks: “Now Hannah, I'm relying on you to look after your sister”, Mum says.

⁸ Note that very short scripts often don't provide the marker with much evidence, for example, only one use of a digraph doesn't necessarily indicate the writer has control over that spelling pattern. If this is the case, it might help to ask yourself: “If more had been written would more words have been correctly spelt?”

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