Assessing Primary Writers

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Carl Anderson is a literacy consultant and writer. He is the author of How’s It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring With Student Writers (2000), Assessing Writers (2005), and Strategic Writing Conferences: Smart Conversations that Move Young Writers Forward Grades 3-6 (2009).
THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LIFELONG WRITER

A Lifelong Writer has initiative as a writer when she

- Writes by choice for purposes that matter to her
- Writes for audiences that matter to her

A Lifelong Writer writes well when she

- Communicates meaning in her writing.

- Structures texts in ways that enables readers to grasp her meaning.

- Uses precise detail to develop parts of the structure.

- Gives her writing an appropriate voice to enhance her meaning.

- Uses conventions to guide the reader through the text and enhance her meaning.

A Lifelong Writers has a writing process that works for her when

- She has a repertoire of writing tools and strategies that she uses to navigate the writing process (rehearsal, drafting, revising, editing) that enable her to write well time and time again.
Definitions of the Traits of Good Writing

Meaning

- We expect that an author has "something to say" or will have "a point" to make about his topic.
- Meaning influences almost all of the decisions a writer makes while composing a text.
- Some children see writing as retelling, instead of communicating meaning.

Structure

- Structure refers to the parts of sections of a text, and their roles and interrelationships within a text.
- A writer's meaning helps her decide which parts to include (or focus on) in a text. The role of each part, then, is to help develop meaning.
- A writer decides which kinds of parts to include in a text.
- In narrative genres, a writer orders the parts in time; in non-narrative texts, logic binds the parts together.
Leads, endings and transitions help guide the reader along the path towards creating meaning. A writer weights some parts more than others because they play a more crucial role in developing meaning.

Detail

- Details are the particulars (or specifics) of a piece of writing.
- Every detail plays a role in helping a writer develop what he's trying to say about his topic.
- Writers use a range of detail to develop meaning.
- In their details, writers use specific words that describe exactly what happens in a narrative, or that describe exactly the subject of a non-narrative.

Voice

- Voice is the writer's presence on the page. It's the sense that there is a person behind the words.
- Writers use voice to enhance their meaning.
- Writers create voice in the way they write sentences.
- Writers create voice in the way they use punctuation.
• Writers create voice through their choice of details.

Conventions

• The conventions of written English are tools for writers to help them communicate meaning.
• Student errors are either careless errors, or errors that are signs that they are growing as writers.
• Students make very predictable errors when they are on “syntactic thresholds”—that is, they are learning to write more complex sentences.
ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Initiating Writing:

Why are you writing this?
Which genre are you writing in? Why?
Who do you hope will read this?

Writing Well

What are you doing to write well?
What does your draft still need?
What revisions did you make? Why?

Process

Where are you in the process of writing this piece?
What steps are you going through to write this piece?
What strategies are you using? How are they helping you to write well?
GOAL SETTING AND CONFERRING

• One of the most important conferring questions is, “What do I teach in this conference?”

• Many teachers figure out what to teach in the first few minutes of a conference. Many times, however, teaching decisions are inaccurate. And teachers who use this conference approach often feel anxious about conferring.

• Having writing goals for students can help us confer more accurately (and with less anxiety). When we confer with writing goals in mind, we already have several possible directions in mind for a conference even before we begin.

• Writing goals can be about process, writing well, or initiative.

• We set goals for students at the beginning of the school year. Four or five goals is usually enough to work on with a student for the first half of the school year (when we revisit and perhaps revise them).

• It’s preferable to continue to work on a writing goal across several conferences than it is to teach something different in every conference.

• Record-keeping systems can help us track goals for students across time.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line of Growth</th>
<th>Goals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus/Structure</td>
<td>• Make the focus of a piece central in sketches</td>
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<td>• Include parts in pieces that develop meaning</td>
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<td>• Develop parts that contribute most to meaning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Establish the focus of pieces in leads</td>
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<td>• Bring closure to the focus in endings</td>
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<td>• Develop repertoire of ways of transitioning readers from part to part and from detail to detail</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elaboration</td>
<td>• Learn to add a variety of kinds of details to sketches</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Develop repertoire of genre-specific details</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Write details with precision</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Elaborate using multiple details</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>• Use punctuation to create voice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conventions</td>
<td>• Punctuate simple/compound/complex sentences with precision</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Use beginning and ending sentence markers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Spell high frequency words accurately</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Spell subject-specific words accurately</td>
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<td>Topic Choice</td>
<td>• Develop and use repertoire of writing territories</td>
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<td>• Find ideas for writing from everyday life</td>
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<td>Topic Development</td>
<td>• Brainstorm points to be made in a piece (nonnarrative) or scenes that could be included (narrative)</td>
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<td>• Develop strategies for gathering details for a piece</td>
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<tr>
<td>Text Fluency</td>
<td>• Develop a repertoire of strategies for getting text down on the page.</td>
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<td>Envisionment/Planning</td>
<td>• Develop repertoire of planning strategies</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Strategic planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revision</td>
<td>• Develop repertoire of revision tools</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Add words, phrases, sentences to texts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Delete unnecessary words/details/sections</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Reorder sections of a text</td>
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<td>• Make strategic revisions, any or all of above</td>
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<td>Editing</td>
<td>• Develop repertoire of self-editing strategies</td>
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<td>• Edit collaboratively</td>
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<td>Publishing</td>
<td>• Integrate genre formats into final drafts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>• Extend range of purposes for writing</td>
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<td>Audience</td>
<td>• Extend range of audiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>If I see this . . . (I recognize this assessment pattern)</td>
<td>I’ll set this writing goal . . .</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>The student writes “all about” a topic</td>
<td>Include parts in pieces that develop meaning</td>
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<tr>
<td>The student includes parts in a generally focused piece that don’t connect to meaning.</td>
<td>Delete parts that don’t connect to meaning.</td>
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<td>The student writes a series of undeveloped section in her drafts.</td>
<td>Develop parts in drafts.</td>
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<td>The student develops parts in pieces, but not always the ones that are central to communicating meaning.</td>
<td>Develop parts that contribute most to meaning.</td>
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<td>The student moves abruptly from one part to another pieces.</td>
<td>Develop repertoire of transitions.</td>
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<td>The student has a partial repertoire of detail in her repertoire.</td>
<td>Develop repertoire of genre-specific details.</td>
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<td>The student includes a smattering of a kind of detail, but doesn’t yet create strings of them in a section.</td>
<td>Elaborate using strings of details.</td>
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<td>The student writes with very general kinds of details.</td>
<td>Write details with precision.</td>
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<td>The student reads her writing with voice, but doesn’t cue the reader to do the same.</td>
<td>Develop repertoire of ways to give voice to a text</td>
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<td>The student overuses voice</td>
<td>Use voice techniques</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Solution</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>The student uses endmarks inconsistently, or not at all</td>
<td>Use beginning and end of sentence markers with precision.</td>
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<td>Read aloud for sentence endings.</td>
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<td>The student overuses the word “and.”</td>
<td>Punctuate compound sentences correctly.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Editing for “ands.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>The student writes dependent clause fragments.</td>
<td>Punctuate complex sentences with precision.</td>
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<td>Read aloud for commas after subordinate conjunctions.</td>
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<td>The student has trouble coming up with topics to write about.</td>
<td>Develop repertoire of strategies for finding worthwhile topics.</td>
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<td>Writing territories; writing off of everyday life.</td>
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<td>The student jumps into drafting without rehearsing his topic; consequently the draft is skimpy and undeveloped.</td>
<td>Brainstorm scenes/points to be made in a draft; develop repertoire of strategies for gathering details for sections before drafting.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The student rehearses her writing, but jumps into a draft without planning how it will go.</td>
<td>Develop repertoire of planning strategies.</td>
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<td>Sketching across pages; talking out each part; writing a simple plan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The student does/does not rehearse her writing before drafting, but is unable to answer the question, “What do I want to say to readers in my draft?”</td>
<td>Write to learn to discover meaning.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Answer the question, “What do I want to say in my draft?”</td>
</tr>
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<td>The student is having trouble with writing text (avoids putting text on the page, asks for help with spelling words, etc.)</td>
<td>Develop repertoire of strategies for getting words on page.</td>
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<td>Sounding out words; how to use the word wall; ask someone else how to spell a word, etc.</td>
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<td>The student is “done” as soon as she writes a draft.</td>
<td>Add words, phrases, sentences to drafts.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reread, stop pause and ask, “What else could I say?”; peer conferring.</td>
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<td>The student makes simple revisions, but not the major one a draft needs because there is not room to do so on drafts.</td>
<td>Develop a repertoire of revision tools.</td>
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<td>Using post-it notes; spiderlegs; asterisks; arrows, etc.</td>
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<td>The student revises, but not always the most important parts.</td>
<td>Strategic revision</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Put stars next to most important parts and develop those further if necessary.</td>
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<td>The student edits by reading aloud to herself.</td>
<td>Develop repertoire of editing strategies.</td>
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<td>Read a draft out loud to yourself or to a classmate in</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Solution</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>The student complains that writing is boring.</td>
<td>Develop a repertoire of purposes for writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>When given a choice, the student tends to write in the same genre over and over.</td>
<td>Develop a repertoire of purposes for writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student doesn’t know who to share her writing with.</td>
<td>Develop a sense of audience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The student always share his writing with the same audience.</td>
<td>Extend range of audiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conference Notes</td>
<td>Goals</td>
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T is the symbol for teaching point.  
G is the symbol for instructional goal.
Finding Carl

My books, *Assessing Writers* and *How’s It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring with Student Writers*, are available through Heinemann. ([www.heinemann.com](http://www.heinemann.com)).

My new Heinemann firsthand series, *Strategic Writing Conferences: Smart Conversations that Move Young Writers Forward Grades 3-6*, is now available. ([www.strategicwritingconferences.com](http://www.strategicwritingconferences.com))

If you have any questions about the workshop, please feel free to email me:

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