

Assessment and the Writing Criterion Scale

High quality teaching starts with effective assessment and embeds assessment for learning across the curriculum.

Big Writing as an approach to teaching and raising standards in writing grew out of the development of a set of criteria for the effective assessment of writing – the **Writing Criterion Scale**. The VCOP skills and basic skills on which *Big Writing* focuses are those identified through the assessment process as having the most impact on children’s progress in writing, which is why *Big Writing* is so effective; it focuses on the skills which transform ‘ordinary’ writing (previously a good Level 3) into increasingly sophisticated, ‘higher level’ writing (previously Level 4 and beyond).

The Writing Criterion Scale is a comprehensive skills hierarchy for writing that is divided into seven Grades and spans the full age and ability range within a primary school. It is designed to:

- ▶ give teachers a clear and accurate picture of what each child can do
- ▶ help teachers, children and parents understand the next steps in a child’s learning
- ▶ communicate those next steps to the child in a way that they can understand
- ▶ provide a clear skills hierarchy that ensures better subject knowledge for teachers
- ▶ help teachers communicate effectively with colleagues, parents and inspectors.

The Writing Criterion Scale and the new National Curriculum in England

The Writing Criterion Scale has recently been revised and updated to ensure that it falls in line with the expectations of the new National Curriculum for England; crucially it provides full support for teachers in assessing pupils without the use of NC Levels. Schools already confident in using the Writing Criterion Scale won’t be surprised to learn that very few changes were needed, although a new ‘Grade 6’ has been added to reflect increased expectations at the end of Year 6. The thresholds between the Emergent Grade and Grade 1 (the former W1 and Level 1) and Grade 1 and Grade 2 (the former Level 1 and 2) have also been significantly raised. Thorough skills coverage, an understanding of purpose and audience, clear progression and high expectations have always featured in the Writing Criterion Scale making it the perfect tool for the new curriculum.

The Writing Criterion Scale and other UK Curricula

The Writing Criterion Scale is a generic skills hierarchy that is, in many ways, 'curriculum neutral' because it evolved out of an understanding of what progress in writing looks like and this progress is the same, regardless of the curriculum being followed. Schools in Northern Ireland can thus be assured that use of the Writing Criterion Scale will help them to raise standards in line with the expectations of their curricula. For schools in Wales and Scotland customized versions are available that reflect the individualism of their curricula. Further details are provided on pages 40–52.

Summative Assessment

In *Big Writing* it is recommended that schools carry out a formal assessment of children's writing each term to provide summative information about where every child is with their writing and to inform next steps. Pupils complete a piece of unsupported writing that is then assessed using the Writing Criterion Scale. This assessment provides a Grade for each child – that can be cross-referenced to national expectations – and, over time, the termly assessment evidence provides a very clear picture of the progress children are making in writing. It also helps to quickly identify children falling behind or progressing rapidly beyond expectations.

Assessment for Learning

Big Writing is all about involving pupils in their learning by sharing the 'secret garden' of assessment with them. Thus:

- ▶ These are the few new skills you need to learn to immediately improve your writing.
- ▶ I will teach you these skills and help you to practise them.
- ▶ If you use these new skills – as well as those you already have – regularly in your writing you will become a better writer.
- ▶ Then, we'll look at some more new skills that will make you even better ...

The termly, formal assessments provide a clear 'snapshot' of pupil achievement and progress but, more importantly, these assessments show teachers, children and parents exactly what a child can do and what they need to do next in order to make progress. In particular, they can flag up skills that really should be secure at a given point, such as use of full stops and capital letters or poor spelling of high frequency words. Teachers can then use this evidence to inform immediate next steps (over the next 2–3 weeks) as well as medium and long-term targets for all pupils and to inform their teaching of writing across the curriculum. Furthermore, teachers are able to identify which skills are required for one pupil only and thus require one-to-one coaching, which can be addressed with a small group and which are whole class issues.

Extended pieces of writing produced in the weekly Big Write – and/or at other times during the week – should be marked against children's two or three immediate targets, not against the whole Writing Criterion Scale. This allows teachers and pupils – through discussion and peer-review of marked writing – to ensure children are making progress as a result of targeted teaching, and to revise targets once learning is secure. It also allows for regular praise and celebration of targets achieved, making it highly motivating for children.