Assessment in
Explorations in Nonfiction Writing

Assessing and monitoring students’ competencies as writers is a critical component in planning and implementing a focused, balanced nonfiction writing program. In *Explorations in Nonfiction Writing*, it is a daily occurrence. Pre-assessment, ongoing monitoring, and final assessment enable you to:

- Plan Extended Writing Units, Power Writes, and focused minilessons based on the common needs of the class
- Tailor instruction to the needs of each writer through conferences and small-group instruction
- Document each student’s growth as a writer
- Give students an opportunity to see their own growth as writers

**WHAT WILL I ASSESS?**

You may be embedding nonfiction writing into your content curriculum—writing letters to town officers in a Power Write or writing a persuasive essay to the school principal in a social studies EWU—but resist the temptation to confuse students’ content learning with their writing performance. Judge the merits of their writing by how well it reflects the text features and writing traits you have taught.

Identifying the specific traits that students need as nonfiction writers is critical. It enables you to provide targeted formal and informal assessments and look at specific attributes and strategies while monitoring students’ growth and planning instruction.

**Purpose-Centered Writing Rubrics**

Every section of this book begins with an introduction to the writing purpose and contains a rubric, Key Skills and Understandings, that is specific to the type of text being studied. This rubric is a helpful tool that will guide your pre-assessment, help you choose focused minilessons, direct your individual student conferences, and
help you assess the progress of your writers. Keep the rubric at your fingertips—or use the Ongoing Monitoring Sheet that is a direct copy of the rubric on a tracking form—when teaching Extended Writing Units and when assessing writing products that result from Power Writes. (Full-size copies of the Ongoing Monitoring Sheet can be printed from the Resources CD-ROM or found in the Resources section at the back of this book.)

In addition, each Power Write begins with a notation of the critical features of the form or text type that students will be writing and ends with a focused summation and assessment of these same features. You always know what is important for students to know and for you to teach and assess.

The Individual Assessment Record and the Ongoing Monitoring Sheet are tools for tracking and teaching for writing progress.

WHEN SHOULD I ASSESS?

Explorations in Nonfiction Writing puts the emphasis on formative assessment—ongoing assessment that informs instruction—so assessment permeates every session of an EWU and every Power Write. Instead of building on separate test performances that distract writers from the important business of moving forward in their writing development, Explorations in Nonfiction Writing integrates daily, explicit, natural opportunities to gather data, assess understanding, and make plans for specific demonstrations in whole-class, small-group, and individual settings based on identified needs.
Before, During, and After an Extended Writing Unit

You can assess students' strengths and needs during each unit in an additional session beforehand or by analyzing student work that you already have on hand.

Formal Pre-Assessment: After a basic introduction to each writing purpose and form as well as a review of various examples, have students write in the same form about a topic they already know a lot about. Encourage students to use as many of the features of the particular writing form as possible, but don’t provide direct support. The goal here is to find out how much students already know about the writing purpose and form so you can tailor your teaching accordingly.

Experimentation in Writer's Notebooks: You might want to stop short of a formal pre-assessment and instead ask students to experiment with writing in their writer's notebooks at the end of the first session. This exercise may be less unnerving for some students and should yield enough information to form the basis of your pre-assessment.

Looking Back at Previous Work: Whether you choose to assess students’ writing skills before beginning an Extended Writing Unit or during the first session, we recommend that you also consider unrelated writing projects that you've already collected from students. These may not reveal much about your students’ ability to write a coherent procedure, for example, but should tell you a great deal about their grasp of writing conventions and other traits such as focus, organization, voice, and sentence fluency. Depending on how much student work you already have on hand, you might not have to devote any class time to pre-assessment.

Your analysis of students’ strengths and weaknesses will tell you what they already know—thus, what you do not need to teach—and what they don’t know about a particular form and purpose. This information scaffolds and supports planning of minilessons to specifically target learner needs while providing a way to celebrate the understandings that writers bring to the unit of study.

Use the class Ongoing Monitoring Sheet (copy the full-size version from the Resources section at the back of this book, or print a copy from the Resources CD-ROM) or a recording form of your own to record the results of your analysis and keep track of the key skills and understandings students need to learn. Use whatever notation system works for you to monitor student performance and to identify what you need for whole-class and small-group instruction or for individual teaching conferences in order to ensure understanding. Record observations on your Ongoing Monitoring Sheet, and update it throughout the EWU as you collect and review student work. (If you want to keep a separate record of each student’s understanding, use copies of the Individual Assessment Record on the Resources CD-ROM and in the Resources section at the back of this book.)
At the conclusion of the unit, analyze each student’s individual piece, and use the Ongoing Monitoring Sheet or the Individual Assessment Record to track individual growth. Use these results to inform future units.

**With Every Power Write**

The Assess the Learning feature of every Power Write lesson provides you with specific tips for looking at students’ writing. You can make your assessment part of your observational notes as you circulate among writers, helping them during the Writing and Coaching part of your lessons. Or you might use the tips either to establish the final step in children’s daily writing or to guide Sharing and Reflecting.

During Sharing and Reflecting, Assess the Learning offers students a variety of self-assessment opportunities. Children may be asked to compare their writing to the model you created to be sure that their work includes all the features of the target text type. They may be invited to meet with a partner and identify the elements they are most proud of in their writing. In addition, each Power Write contains a self-assessment checklist designed for children. You’ll note that this checklist reflects the precise features and understandings that are the focus of instruction. Read more about checklists under Self-Assessment on page xxxii.

**HOW SHOULD I ASSESS?**

The ongoing assessment embedded in Explorations assumes that you’ll want to collect and evaluate student writing often (formative assessment to inform your instructional plans), that you’ll want to encourage children to look at and become constructive critics of their own writing (self-assessment to build writer confidence and independence), and that in the end you’ll want to have clear evidence that students are becoming more powerful and flexible writers (summative assessment to provide a record of growth).

**Formative Assessment**

Make it a point every day or two to look at the writing or the research created by your students so you can assess understanding and decide if some writers need support through additional modeling, reteaching, a writing conference, and so on. This kind of regular informal review of work will quickly tell you if all students, or just a few, need additional support in implementing a nonfiction writing strategy. It will tell you what to bring up in the next one-on-one conference, with a small group needing special support, or in a whole-class focus lesson. As noted above, the Ongoing Monitoring Sheet is a convenient place to record and store your ongoing observations for both EWUs and Power Writes.

It is especially important to use what you find in students’ writing as an opportunity to celebrate writer strength and see the positives in the work of each child. Even if you only take a few samples per afternoon from Power Writes or EWUs and review them to identify points of growth and learner need, you will be well informed about the progress of your students and the steps you need to take in lifting them as nonfiction writers.
In addition, writing conferences during the Writing and Coaching part of each day are perfect forums for observing, evaluating, recording, and teaching. A clipboard loaded with your Ongoing Monitoring Sheet or a stack of sticky notes or some other convenient data collector of your choice on which to write notes about each child will set you up to make the most of your side-by-side talks with students. Your review of a child’s writing the day before, your notes, or your Ongoing Monitoring Sheet may suggest what you want to examine. Alternatively, you may simply sit down and see what the writer is working on, seizing the moment to praise what he or she is already doing and to suggest one more step toward writing excellence. Consult the Focus on Conferring section in A Guide to Teaching Nonfiction Writing, Grades 3–5, for tips on effective writing conferences.

Self-Assessment

We know that self-reflection and self-assessment are among the most powerful tools we utilize in education. There are many opportunities for student reflection and self-assessment built into Explorations.

› Sharing and Reflecting: In both Extended Writing Units and Power Writes, writers pause at the end of each day to consider their learning for the session. They self-assess the facts they gathered, the quality of the revisions they made, the kinds of edits they inserted into their work, or the quality of headings that were featured in their nonfiction writing, monitoring their growth as writers. To facilitate this kind of self-reflection, you will find a Student Self-Assessment Sheet for each writing purpose on the Resources CD-ROM.

› Self-Assessment Checklists: Every Power Write has a self-assessment checklist that you may elect to have students discuss or fill out and save in their writing folders for ongoing reflection on personal growth. You may elect to read the checklist aloud and have children think about and discuss it, or you may have writers actually fill it out (a full-size copy is on the Resources CD-ROM) and save it in their writing folders for ongoing reflection on personal growth. The interactive nature of the self-assessment increases self-reflection and writers’ observation of their own work.

› Revising and Editing Checklists: These encourage writers to look critically at their own work. Choose from or adapt the collection of writing and editing checklists on the Resources CD-ROM.

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**SELF-ASSESSMENT**

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<tr>
<th>Summary with Headings</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>2. Headings</td>
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<td>3. Descriptive words</td>
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<td>4. Title</td>
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<td>5. Conclusion</td>
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<td>6. Linking words to connect ideas: because, so, when, since, also, and, besides, in addition, for example</td>
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<td>7. Photographs</td>
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Self-assessment checklists at the end of every Power Write highlight the key elements writers should be sure to include.
Summative Assessment

As suggested in *A Guide to Teaching Nonfiction Writing, Grades 3–5*, you will want to maintain a storage folder for children’s writing as well as a folder for ongoing work. The storage folder can house the various compositions that result from Power Write lessons as well as final EWU projects. After a few months, writers (and their parents!) can glance through and see the array of different text types they have written, and more important, you and the writers can look for evidence of growth. Is the child writing more in January than he did at the beginning of the school year? Is she trying more spellings and more features? Are mechanics becoming more conventional? Do later pieces look more “finished”—detailed, neat, illustrated—than earlier pieces, showing that the child has become engaged as a real writer? Document the changes. Comparing work from month to month should give you summative evidence of improvement.

If you have been sure to keep writers’ pre-assessment writing samples from your earlier analysis of their writing skills, you have the perfect vehicle for demonstrating growth. Look at the writer’s pre-assessment sample and final writing side by side. Consult the Key Skills and Understandings rubric or the Ongoing Monitoring Sheet. What does the writer do now that he or she did not do before? How many elements on the rubric has the writer added to her or his repertoire? Has the writer moved from beginning to use a skill to developing it or from developing a skill to using it with confidence? If you need to give grades, rubrics and the writer’s ongoing work will give you plenty of data to inform them.

There is one added benefit to before-and-after writing samples. When writers are presented with their “before” samples and asked to compare them and their final writing with the “Features of a Great _______” chart that was built throughout the unit of study, students see for themselves how much they now know about the form of writing under study. The comparison of the writing pieces often results in astonishment for the writers but usually ends in joyful celebration as they recognize their own progress.