



*A New Day for the Civil Service*

# Writing Ability: Not Just Another Form of Communication

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# Agenda

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- Importance of Writing Assessment
- Types of Writing Assessments
- Considerations for Selecting and Developing a Writing Assessment
- Using Technology in Writing Assessments
- Five Unforgettable Facts

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# What people are saying...

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- Writing is a dead art.
- No one writes well anymore.
- I had to spend three hours revising this report!
- “Poor writing hampers a producer’s ability to produce.”
- Text messaging has ruined writing in the workplace... LOL is not a word!

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# What the literature says...

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*“Rapid change in workplace practices of last few years entails an ever-increasing emphasis on the need for workers to write in a variety of ways.”*

(Davies & Birbili, 2000)

*“Writing skills are fundamental in business. It’s increasingly important to be able to convey content in a tight, logical, direct manner, particularly in a fast-paced technological environment.”*

(National Commission of Writing)

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# What is writing?

- “Recognizes or uses correct English grammar, punctuation, and spelling; communicates information in a succinct and organized manner; produces written information, which may include technical material, that is appropriate for the intended audience.”
- Elements of Writing:
  - Clarity
  - Grammar
  - Mechanics
  - Usage
  - Organization
  - Brevity
  - Formats
  - Idea development
  - Impact on audience
  - Vocabulary
  - Adapting to audience or situation
  - Problem solving
  - Reading

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# Extensive Writing in the Workplace

- Changing nature of the workplace
  - Increase in technology resources
  - Flatter management structures
  - Emphasis on accountability & outcome-measurement
  - Increasing preference for email and text (GenY)
- Increasing frequency
  - 23% of time at work spent writing (Faigley & Miller, 1982)
  - 66% of salaried employees in American corporations (National Commission of Writing, 2004)
- Variety of writing
  - Internal versus External Audience
  - Informal versus Formal
  - Non-technical versus Technical
  - Political considerations



# Validity of Writing Assessment

- Content validity
  - High quality job analysis determine what form of writing is most critical
- Construct validity
  - Multiple Choice Test<sup>2</sup>
    - $r = .55$  with a writing sample test
- Criterion-related validity
  - Letter Writing Exercise<sup>1</sup>
    - $r = .37$  with job knowledge
  - Writing Evaluation in an In-basket Exercise<sup>1</sup>
    - $r = .23$  to  $.53$  with various job performance criteria
  - Multiple Choice Test<sup>3</sup>
    - $r_{corrected} = .18$  to  $.70$  with various job performance criteria

<sup>1</sup>Hoffman et al. (1997); <sup>2</sup>Bayless & Leaman (2010); <sup>3</sup>McElreath, Hayes, & Reilly (2003)

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# \$ Utility of Writing Assessment \$

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- Quality assessments yield quality writers
- Return on Investment
  - Cost savings
    - “Remedying deficiencies in writing costs American corporations as much as \$3.1 billion annually” (National Commission of Writing)
  - Time savings
    - Efficiency in the workplace
- And everything else!
  - Clarity and understanding across audiences
  - Professional and trusted organizational image





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## Writing Assessments

Five Options

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# Multiple-Choice Format

- Requires the applicant to read samples of writing (i.e., documents) and respond to several multiple-choice items that assess basic elements of writing ability.
- Each document included in the assessment represents the various styles of writing (e.g., a letter, a flyer) and serves a different purpose which must be considered by the reader
- Questions are related to and measure:
  - Grammar and Punctuation
  - Organization
  - Sentence structure
  - Style

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# Multiple-Choice Format Example Items

1. Consider the style in which this document is written and what it communicates. Who is the MOST appropriate audience?
  - A. Supervisors and managers
  - B. Customer Service Representatives
  - C. Non-supervisory personnel
  - D. All employees
2. Which of the following sentences contains a grammatical error?
  - A. You may need to update your software with a XP security patch that was recently released.
  - B. Frank Smith III is described as an eloquent speaker.
  - C. Please create a web-based password to access the website.
  - D. Your proposal is due by 8 December 2009.

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# Multiple-Choice Format Strengths & Considerations

- Strengths
  - Easier administration
  - Easier scoring
  - Strong support for validity
  - More objective approach
- Considerations
  - Only assesses basic mechanics of writing
  - Applicants' reactions are not favorable
  - Sometimes little face validity
  - Not applicable to specific, higher-level jobs

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# Structured Writing Sample

- Applicant is provided with guidelines and criteria for selecting and submitting a sample of their writing
- Writing sample is evaluated based on established benchmarks of various dimensions of writing
  - Grammar and Punctuation
  - Organization
  - Sentence Structure

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# Structured Writing Sample Example Instructions

- Below are the guidelines that you must follow for your writing sample to be considered.
  - **Your Own Work.** The writing sample must be substantially your own work. Do not submit work that has been heavily edited by others...
  - **Type of Document.** Please carefully consider the type of document that you submit. Typical examples of documents submitted for this position include...
  - **Length and Format of Document.** Your document must be at least 3 pages but no more than 10 pages long in an MS Word program or PDF format...
  - **Reference for Verification.** You must provide a reference for verification of your writing sample...

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# Structured Writing Sample Strengths & Considerations


- Strengths
  - High face validity for applicants
  - Low applicant burden
  - Multiple ratings/consensus
  - Holistic assessment of writing
- Considerations
  - Increased risk for applicant misunderstanding and abuse
  - Large variance in applicant submissions can complicate the rating process
  - Resource intensive

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# Report Writing Exercise

- Applicant is presented with a brief narrative and a randomized list of facts in bulleted format, not in full sentences. The candidate uses this information to develop a narrative report in a specified format.
- Requires applicants to organize the information, and present it in a clear, concise, and accurate manner.
- Narrative is evaluated based on established benchmarks of various dimensions of writing
  - Grammar and Punctuation
  - Organization
  - Sentence Structure
  - Additional elements of writing may be assessed (e.g., style, analytical thinking)




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# Report Writing Exercise

## Example Instructions

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- You are the supervisor in charge. You have been provided a list of information gathered by one of your team members during an investigation; this list of facts is in no particular order. You will need to prepare an Incident Report to document the situation. When generating your Incident Report, use the information provided as the basis for your document. Additional analysis of the facts provided is not required.
  - suspect: male
  - occurred 3:30pm
  - sergeant smith on scene saw everything
  - found near east entrance - white powder
  - ...

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# Report Writing Exercise Strengths & Considerations


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- Strengths
  - Work sample relevant to the position
  - Additional elements of writing may be assessed (e.g., style, analysis)
  - Multiple ratings/consensus
- Considerations
  - Resource intensive
  - Best suited for proctored administration
  - Not suitable across all positions

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# Opinion Essay

- Requires the applicant to draft a written response to: a question, discuss a topic, argue a point
- Applicants are given the same guidelines for format (e.g., number of pages, time to complete)
- The same topic is provided to all applicants
- The assessment may measure:
  - Grammar and Punctuation
  - Organization
  - Sentence Structure
  - Style
  - Additional elements of writing may be assessed (e.g., reasoning, problem solving, analytical thinking)

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# Opinion Essay Example Instructions

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- The mission of OPM is to recruit, retain, and honor a world-class workforce to service the American people. Write an essay describing how you believe you can contribute to that mission.
- You will have one hour to complete this essay. The text box will expand as you write. Your response will be limited to three pages.

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# Opinion Essay Strengths & Considerations

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- Strengths
  - Favorable applicant reactions
  - Multiple ratings/consensus
  - Additional elements of writing may be assessed (e.g., style, analysis)
- Considerations
  - Less objective approach
  - Resource intensive
  - Increased applicant burden
  - Opinion writing is not suitable across all positions

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# In-Basket Exercise

- Requires applicants to review a set of materials, analyze the information, draw conclusions
- Applicants prepare a written argument/recommendation
- The assessment may measure:
  - Grammar and Punctuation
  - Organization
  - Sentence Structure
  - Style
  - Analytical thinking (e.g., reasoning, problem solving, decision making)

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# In-Basket Exercise

## Example Instructions

- For the purposes of this exercise, you are to assume the role of a new analyst with OA Consultants (OAC). OAC is a small consulting firm that evaluates various organizational processes for public and private sector clients. Your supervisor, Chris Carpenter, has asked you to review the attached materials and respond, in writing, to the request found in the memo from the customer.
- The purpose of this exercise is to evaluate your Reasoning and Writing skills. Please be sure to state the request and discuss your findings and conclusions in your report. You will also be evaluated on your presentation of ideas, sentence and paragraph organization, and grammar, punctuation, and spelling. You will have one hour to review the materials and write your report.

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# In-Basket Exercise Strengths & Considerations

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- Strengths
  - A high fidelity assessment
  - High face validity for applicants
  - Suitable for analytical and complex positions
  - Multiple ratings/consensus
- Considerations
  - Resource intensive
  - Increased applicant burden
  - Best suited for proctored administration



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# Considerations for Selecting a Writing Assessment

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- Nature & level of the position
- Critical competencies/elements to be assessed
- Selection ratio (# positions/applicants anticipated)
- Face validity and applicant burden
- Reliability and validity evidence
- Potential for adverse impact
- Assessment environment
- Time available
- Cost and expertise needed to develop and implement the assessment

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# Using Technology

- Collect previously developed documents through an Applicant Tracking System (ATS) or USAJobs
- Use narrative text boxes as items in an unproctored online application to collect writing samples, written reports, or opinion essays
- Explore software options that automatically score writing based on standardized criteria and benchmark/baseline exemplars

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# Five Unforgettable Facts

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- Writing is an important competency with a broad impact
- Writing assessment is a valid and reliable approach
- There is not just one way to assess writing
- Have a strategy prepared to measure writing
- Take advantage of your resources

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Thanks!

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more information please contact:

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## Writing Ability: Not Just Another Form of Communication

**Multiple Choice Format** Requires the applicant to read samples of writing and respond to several multiple-choice items that assess basic elements of writing ability

| Strengths  | Considerations  |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Easier administration</li><li>▪ Easier scoring</li><li>▪ Strong support for validity</li><li>▪ More objective approach</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Only assesses basic mechanics of writing</li><li>▪ Applicants' reactions are not favorable</li><li>▪ Sometimes little face validity</li><li>▪ Not applicable to specific, higher-level jobs</li></ul> |

**Structured Writing Sample** Applicant is provided with guidelines and criteria for selecting and submitting a sample of his/her writing

| Strengths  | Considerations   |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ High face validity for applicants</li><li>▪ Low applicant burden</li><li>▪ Multiple ratings/consensus</li><li>▪ Holistic assessment of writing</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Increased risk for applicant misunderstanding and abuse</li><li>▪ Large variance in applicant submissions can complicate the rating process</li><li>▪ Resource intensive</li></ul> |

**Report Writing Exercise** Applicant is presented with a brief narrative and a randomized list of facts in bulleted format, which the candidate uses to develop a narrative report in a specified format

| Strengths  | Considerations  |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Work sample relevant to the position</li><li>▪ Additional elements of writing may be assessed (e.g., style, analysis)</li><li>▪ Multiple ratings/consensus</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Resource intensive</li><li>▪ Best suited for proctored administration</li><li>▪ Not suitable across all positions</li></ul> |

**Opinion Essay** Requires the applicant to draft a written response to a question, including discussing a topic and arguing a point

| Strengths   | Considerations   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Favorable applicant reactions</li><li>▪ Multiple ratings/consensus</li><li>▪ Additional elements of writing may be assessed (e.g., style, analysis)</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Less objective approach</li><li>▪ Resource intensive</li><li>▪ Increased applicant burden</li><li>▪ Opinion writing is not suitable across all positions</li></ul> |

**In-Basket Exercise** Requires the applicant to review a set of materials, analyze the information, and draw conclusions

| Strengths   | Considerations   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ A high fidelity assessment</li><li>▪ High face validity for applicants</li><li>▪ Suitable for analytical and complex positions</li><li>▪ Multiple ratings/consensus</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Resource intensive</li><li>▪ Increased applicant burden</li><li>▪ Best suited for proctored administration</li></ul> |



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### Five Unforgettable Facts

1. Writing is an important competency with a broad impact
2. Writing assessment is a valid and reliable approach
3. There is not just one way to assess writing
4. Have a strategy prepared to measure writing
5. Take advantage of your resources

### References

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