

# The Word Writing CAFÉ: Assessing student writing for complexity, accuracy, and fluency

*The Word Writing CAFÉ is a new assessment tool designed for teachers to objectively evaluate students' word-writing ability for fluency, accuracy, and complexity.*

Effective teachers want to make a difference in students' reading, writing, and learning. Teachers who use assessments to provide feedback give their students opportunities to demonstrate learning improvement (Guskey, 2003). There are many types of writing assessments that are subjective and individual oriented. However, objective, group-oriented writing tests for today's classrooms are lacking. Rubrics for writing, an example of a subjective evaluation, typically assess ideas, content, vocabulary, word choice, organization, and other features of writing. There are group-oriented tests that evaluate writing mechanics for spelling, punctuation, and grammar usage. However, assessing student growth in writing fluency, accuracy, and complexity is difficult for teachers to do in a whole-class setting. The Word Writing CAFÉ (Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency Evaluation) demonstrates one way teachers can use assessment feedback to understand and improve student word writing through scoring and tracking student progress throughout the school year.

Fluency and accuracy are tied to comprehension of text and successful reading, as well as to the motivation to write. Rasinski noted that "Reading fluency is the ability to read quickly and accurately, with appropriate and meaningful expression" (2003, p. 19). It follows that one aspect of writing fluency is characterized by the ability to write ac-

curately as well as quickly. In addition, evaluating the complexity of student writing provides a view of the level of difficult words that students feel comfortable writing.

Teachers can benefit from being able to examine their students' fluency, accuracy, and complexity in word writing. While there is one well-used assessment of vocabulary knowledge (Clay, 1993), it is only suitable for young children and is only administered to one student at a time. Currently there is no objective assessment of students' word-writing skills for all grade levels that can be given to a whole class at one time, nor any assessment tool that examines the number of words written along with their accuracy and complexity. Lacking such a tool, the Word Writing CAFÉ was created.

The Word Writing CAFÉ is an objective, group-oriented tool that is easy to administer. It assesses three important areas: (1) student fluency in writing words, (2) student accuracy in writing words, and (3) student written production of complex words. For the CAFÉ, the term *word writing* differs from *writing* in that word writing occurs when letters are put together to create a word, while writing in general occurs when words are used to express thoughts and ideas in sentences and paragraphs. Hence the CAFÉ is not designed to assess students' sentence-, paragraph-, or text-writing ability.

There are many benefits to teachers who examine samples of a student's word encoding with the CAFÉ. First, when national benchmarks are complete, it will provide teachers the ability to see how their students compare to national averages. Second, teachers can presently use the CAFÉ to assess student progress. One teacher helping to pilot the CAFÉ told me that it was helpful to give the

CAFÉ at the beginning and end of the year because it allowed her to see what words students felt safe writing coming into her classroom and how that changed over the year. It also revealed the students' interests, strengths, and weaknesses. Many of the teachers mentioned how they used the information from the CAFÉ as a gauge for measuring student growth over the course of the year, making assessments in both fall and spring. They also reported that it helped them plan instruction on specific areas of difficulty, such as consonant blends, digraphs, vowel sounds, and word endings. One first-grade teacher commented, "I could see from what my students wrote that they needed more practice in writing sight words and more work with vowel sounds. I'm now using my reading time in the morning to do that." The following discussion describes the development of the tool and then explains its current use.

## Creating the recipe for the Word Writing CAFÉ

The first task in designing the CAFÉ was to create a measure for students' word-writing fluency in order to show what words have become automatic in the students' writing vocabulary. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) explained why word-writing fluency is so important:

An inventory of words that children know how to write is an indication of what the child controls. A word that the child can write easily represents a "program of action" that can be performed again and again and becomes part of a network of information. These networks form the basis for noticing more and more features of words.... Every word the child can write has a potential for later use. (p. 77)

The tool that seemed best able to address the fluency aspect was Clay's Writing Vocabulary Observation Assessment (1993). It was designed for first graders and is administered individually, which makes it unsuitable for whole-class assessments. However, it does measure the number of words students write, so, in developing the CAFÉ, we decided to include the total number of words attempted as one measure of fluency.

Developing a suitable assessment of accuracy became the second area of focus. As Rasinski

(2003) noted, fluency includes both speed and accuracy. To measure accuracy, we decided to count the number of different words a student could accurately write. Words repeated or spelled unconventionally were disqualified and not included in the counts.

The third area of assessment addresses the production of increasingly complex words. Because readability levels and leveled books based on readabilities are important considerations in today's classrooms (Fry, 2002), and because the number of syllables is typically a factor in determining readability levels (Fry, 1977), we decided to count the number of syllables in the words students wrote as the measure for complexity.

## Appetizers for the Word Writing CAFÉ

The first trial run for the CAFÉ was conducted in a second-grade rural Appalachian elementary classroom in the United States. Students were given 10 minutes and asked to write words or sentences on a blank paper. After analyzing the procedure and results, we made several important changes. The most significant change was to eliminate sentence writing because this produced an overwhelming number of repeated words (e.g., *I, is, the, of, and*) and was too time-consuming for teachers to score. Recognizing that fluency and speed of writing are different, we decided to focus on just asking students to write words.

This focus on words influenced the next change. We decided to use boxes for individual words instead of a blank paper. (See Figure 1 for an example of a completed first-grade CAFÉ form.) This change was made only after careful deliberation and discussion with teachers. The grade-level forms vary by increased numbers of boxes included on each form. For instance, first- and second-grade forms have 30 boxes per page, and 9th- to 12th-grade forms have 91 boxes per page.

While the boxes remove the contextualization that is associated with "authentic" writing, the primary goal was to develop a time-efficient tool to measure complexity, accuracy, and fluency encoding, not to develop a tool for analysis of student compositions in general. For instance, if a student wrote, "I like cats, I like dogs," there would be

FIGURE 1  
Completed CAFÉ form

1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup>

NAME	DATE	TEACHER
The	dad	Sun
see	Mom	<del>man</del>
They	two	your
Then	too	<del>six</del>
<del>Thes</del>	to	ran
you	grandma	<del>playd</del>
yes	grandpa	Play
no	<del>cat</del> cat	<del>sally</del> bally
on	dog	
can	Boo!	

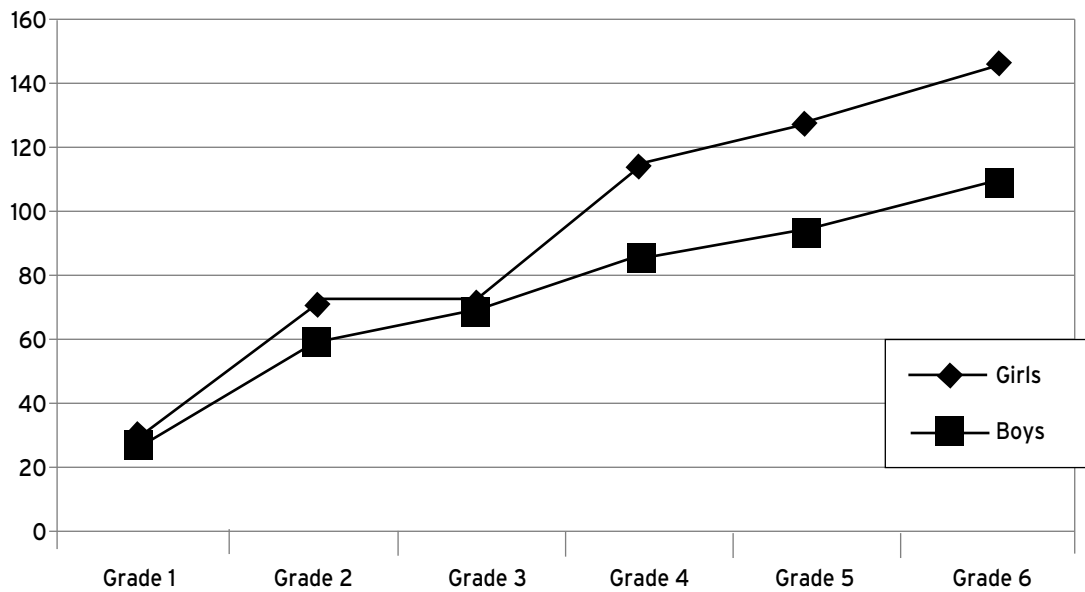
TW: 28	CW: 28	IS: 22	2S: 2	3S:	4S:	5S:	6S:
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many repetitions but little insight on that student's range of vocabulary or its complexity. We wanted to see the variety of different words that students could write and the complexity that they controlled. However, no mention was made of complex words in the instructions given because we did not want to intimidate students if they could only think of

smaller words. Rather, we wanted to see what words students were comfortable writing.

The following year another pilot was conducted in the same school. This time it was in grades 1 through 6 and was administered in both October and April. Because the second-grade students wanted more than 10 minutes to write, we

**FIGURE 2**  
Mean total words by grade and gender



increased the length of writing time to 15 minutes. When we did this, we added more prompts that teachers could use. Teachers were enthusiastic about the test and reported that the CAFÉ provided interesting and useful information about individual student strengths and limitations with word writing. This provided face validity for teachers because they were able to examine students' word writing in relation to the instructional teaching methods being used in their classrooms. It will take more time and a wider sampling for its statistical validity to be secured.

### Feature findings for the Word Writing CAFÉ

Following the first two trials with one school, two additional schools were invited to participate in a third pilot to broaden the study. Each of the three schools was in a different part of the same state in the north central United States. During the year, the CAFÉ test was given in October and April. Two of

the schools included grades 1 through 6, and one school included only first and second grade. The socioeconomic status of the schools, measured in terms of free and reduced-cost lunches, ranged from 28% to 85%, where higher percentages correspond to lower socioeconomic levels.

For issues of reliability, we decided to look at raw scores for attempted word fluency, word accuracy, and word complexity, and averaged them for grade level, gender, and grade by gender (see Tables 1–3). Medians were also run, with no statistical differences from the averages. The graph in Figure 2 shows the mean total words by grade and gender for this group of students. You can see the increases over the grades for both genders. However, these findings were limited to three schools within one state and cannot yet be generalized to a larger population.

Another interesting observation focused on gender. We expected there would be increases over the grade levels in each of the three areas of assessment. What we didn't expect was how much better the girls would do than the boys at all grade

**TABLE 1**  
Means by grade level

Grade	Number of students	Means							
		Total words	Words correct	Number of one-syllable words	Number of two-syllable words	Number of three-syllable words	Number of four-syllable words	Number of five-syllable words	Number of six-syllable (or more) words
First grade	60	44.13	37.25	34.25	2.90	0.1	0.02	0	0
Second grade	69	86.38	77.59	64.39	11.55	1.32	0.36	0.04	0
Third grade	44	93.45	78.93	59.93	15.70	2.52	0.50	0.05	0
Fourth grade	42	120.76	108.24	82.79	21.17	3.64	0.50	0.17	0
Fifth grade	49	128.45	118.63	87.29	26.71	4.90	0.55	0.14	0
Sixth grade	49	151.47	139.33	97.47	33.65	5.76	1.06	0.35	0.02
Total	313								

**TABLE 2**  
Means by gender

Gender	Number of students	Means							
		Total words	Words correct	Number of one-syllable words	Number of two-syllable words	Number of three-syllable words	Number of four-syllable words	Number of five-syllable words	Number of six-syllable (or more) words
Male	147	90.53	79.33	61.86	15.08	2.27	0.39	0.06	0
Female	166	109.64	99.92	75.73	19.83	3.31	0.54	0.16	0.01

levels within this population—a difference that broadened with grade level. At fourth grade, the girls' scores were over 25% higher than the boys'.

### An unexpected menu item

After the results were collated, we decided to enter all of the words that students wrote and run tallies in order to see what were the most common words by grade level. You can view these results in Table 4. While there are many lists of high-frequency

words based on written texts, there are no lists of the most commonly written words by students. When we tallied the CAFÉ words most frequently written, the selected words appeared to be influenced by three things: (1) Three of the original prompts given to students during the instructions asked students to write animals, pets, and colors. In future studies fewer and more generalized prompts will be given to students. (2) Another influencing factor may have been the instructional focus of the teacher. For instance, you can see the word *rectangle* was the 11th most frequently written word for fourth graders.

**TABLE 3**  
Means for grade by gender

Grade and gender	Number of students	Means							
		Total words	Words correct	Number of one-syllable words	Number of two-syllable words	Number of three-syllable words	Number of four-syllable words	Number of five-syllable words	Number of six-syllable (or more) words
First-grade girls	34	46.62	40.41	37.12	3.15	0.12	0.03	0	0
First-grade boys	26	40.88	33.12	30.50	2.58	0.08	0	0	0
Second-grade girls	37	96.81	89.73	74.08	13.73	1.51	0.43	0.05	0
Second-grade boys	32	74.31	63.56	53.19	9.03	1.09	0.28	0.03	0
Third-grade girls	26	94.77	77.88	59.04	16.35	2.77	0.62	0.04	0
Third-grade boys	18	91.56	79.00	61.22	14.78	2.17	0.33	0.06	0
Fourth-grade girls	16	149.00	140.31	104.75	30.38	4.56	0.56	0.13	0
Fourth-grade boys	26	103.38	88.5	69.27	15.5	3.08	0.46	0.19	0
Fifth-grade girls	26	139.81	131.00	96.92	27.35	5.77	0.54	0.23	0
Fifth-grade boys	23	115.61	104.65	76.39	26.00	3.91	0.57	0.04	0
Sixth-grade girls	27	168.52	155.22	105.07	39.07	7.19	1.26	0.59	0.04
Sixth-grade boys	22	130.55	119.82	88.14	27.00	4.00	0.82	0.05	0

(3) The last influencing factor occurred when, despite directions given to teachers, all words in the classroom were not covered. For instance, there may have been Word Wall words still displayed, or even an exit sign still visible. Revised directions include administering the CAFÉ in a place with few or no words, such as the cafeteria or gym.

### Discussion of CAFÉ findings

Teachers administering the CAFÉ in their classrooms for the pilot study were asked to fill

out a brief questionnaire about their experience with the instrument. Some teachers found that it helped them to understand their students better because it provided insight on what the students were thinking about while writing words. For example, one young boy chose to concentrate on words such as *bass*, *fish*, *hunt*, *beer*, *boat*, and so on. One fourth-grade teacher wrote, “I find it very interesting to see the students’ choice of words, and I see a strong correlation between prolific writers and an ability to come up with many words.” Another teacher reported that the instrument helped her assess which students were using digraphs and

**TABLE 4**  
**Most frequently occurring words**

	All	First grade	Second grade	Third grade	Fourth grade	Fifth grade	Sixth grade
1.	Dog	Cat	Cat	Dog	Dog	Bed	Cat
2.	Cat	Dog	Dog	One	Cat	The	Dog
3.	The	The	Mom	Cat	To	Blue	One
4.	One	No	Dad	Red	Is	Dog	Blue
5.	Red	Is	One	Two	Red	Two	Bed
6.	To	Mom	Me	Bed	Ball	One	Six
7.	Blue	To	Ten	The	Two	I	Two
8.	Mom	Can	Bed	Dad	I	Good	Fish
9.	Bed	Red	Blue	Exit	Blue	Green	Red
10.	Two	My	Red	Three	Car	Mom	Cow
11.	Dad	In	To	To	Rectangle	Red	The
12.	Is	It	You	Blue	The	To	Three
13.	I	At	In	Mom	Green	Yellow	Five
14.	My	Dad	Is	My	Happy	Is	Food
15.	Ten	Me	Me	Can	One	Nail	To
16.	Three	See	The	Flag	Black	TV	Football
17.	Green	Ten	I	No	My	People	Paper
18.	You	Blue	Can	Bat	Bed	Bad	A
19.	Me	Go	It	Day	For	Cats	Car
20.	Can	Yes	Play	Fish	Me	Dad	Green

blends in words they chose to write. Many of the teachers noted that students already identified as less proficient spellers tended to write only “safe” words that they were confident writing. Overall, the teachers indicated that the CAFÉ is a quick and useful way to document student progress in word writing. To see how to do this with your own class, just follow the steps in administering and scoring the Word Writing CAFÉ found in Tables 5 and 6.

### Limitations and future menu items

Based on the most recent study, there are several limitations to consider. First, because the studies here were based on a small sampling, it is not yet generalized to other populations. Therefore, this tool should be used to track student progress, not to assign student grade-level abilities. The limitation most noted by teachers was the location for administering the CAFÉ, pointing out that the test should be given in a nonprint environment. Another

limitation is that the study was only conducted in grades 1–6. Because a gender spread was noticed as the grades increased, we do not yet know if this gap continues to get bigger, eventually levels out, or even shrinks. Finally, the validity of the assessment depends on the CAFÉ being administered consistently and according to the directions. Failure to follow the procedures would compromise validity.

To address these issues and further refine the Word Writing CAFÉ, the following plans have been made. (1) Conduct a nationwide sampling among diverse populations and create national averages in grades 1–12 for both fall and spring. The CAFÉ is currently being piloted in grades 7–12. (2) Require that the CAFÉ be given in the gym or cafeteria or some other place with few or no words. (3) Reduce the number of prompts to only four suggestions. (4) Tally the most commonly written words by grade level and gender. (5) Standardize the time limit for all grade levels to 10 minutes. (6) Invite students to use the CAFÉ

**TABLE 5**  
**Steps in administering the Word Writing CAFÉ**

The CAFÉ is structured to invite students to write as many words as they can think of within a 10-minute time period. The CAFÉ is given to the whole class at the same time and can be done in fall and spring to provide an overview of students' increases in word-writing skills. Students write words on paper that is provided. The following steps describe how you can administer the CAFÉ to your own class.

1. Make enough copies of the CAFÉ forms for your grade level so that you will have extra copies available for students who may require multiple sheets of paper.
2. Give the assessment in a room with no or few words displayed on walls. If possible, cover any visible words. Use rooms such as the gym, cafeteria, library, or computer lab. Make sure writing surfaces are cleared of all books and materials.
3. Give each student two copies of the form and two sharp pencils with erasers.
4. Explain the following instructions to the students. Say to the students what is written in the quotes.
  - "Today you will be taking a test to show how many words you know how to write in 10 minutes. You will not be graded on this test, but please do your best. First, write your name, date, grade, and teacher at the top." (You may choose to do some or all of this for your students and eliminate the last sentence.)
  - "Now listen carefully to the following directions: I want to see how many different words you can write in 10 minutes. Only write words in English and not words from other languages."
  - "Look at your paper and notice that there are many boxes. Write only one word in each box and write as neatly as possible."
  - "Do not use the same word more than one time."
  - "Do not use names or a list of names of people. For example, do not write down your classmates' names."
  - "Do not write numbers unless you spell them out."
  - "Do not use any abbreviations."
  - "Do not write the words on the top of your paper: name, date, grade, and teacher. Please keep your eyes on your own paper only."
  - "You may write any word you want, but if you need some ideas, listen as I tell you some topics for words to write." Do not use prompts that are not listed here. Do not use examples of the prompts before the test begins. Say the following,
    - "Write words that tell what you like to do and where you like to go."
    - "Write words that describe what you can see, hear, smell, taste, or feel."
    - "Write words that describe what is in your house or school."
    - "Write any word that you know how to read or write."
  - Tell students, "If you run out of boxes, please raise your hand quietly and I will bring you another piece of paper."
5. Ask students, "Are there any questions?" Answer any questions before beginning to time the 10 minutes. If students ask if spelling counts, ask them to spell words the best they can.
6. Say to the students, "I will tell you when there are only three minutes left. Please begin now." Write the time begun on the board. During the assessment, do not talk except to answer individual questions.
7. Give the students a three-minute notice to complete all writing. Tell them, "There are three minutes left. Remember, write any word that you know how to read or write; write words that tell what you like to do and where you like to go; write words that describe what you can see, hear, smell, taste, or feel; and write words that describe what is in your house or school."
8. When there is only half a minute left, say to the students, "Finish writing your last word and then put your pencils down." Collect all papers after 10 minutes.

throughout the year to track their own scores in each of the three areas as well as to use rubrics to evaluate various characteristics of their word-writing skills; this student self-evaluation is currently being piloted in classrooms at all grade levels. The directions for administering and scoring the CAFÉ in Tables 5 and 6 include these changes related to administering the test.

## An invitation to dine

We know that writing goes hand in hand with reading because writing always includes some reading during production, and reading always involves interpretation of written forms. We know that through writing a child develops strategies to hear sounds in words and to use visual information to



**TABLE 6**  
**Steps in scoring the Word Writing CAFÉ**

1. *Fluency*: First, count the total number of boxes with writing in them. Every box that has an attempt at a word, whether correct or incorrect, counts as one point. Count everything except pictures or scribbles.
2. *Accuracy*: Next, cross out words that are not spelled correctly or are duplicate words. Use the dictionary when in doubt. Follow these rules:

<i>What to count</i>	<i>What to cross out and not count</i>
All words spelled correctly.	Misspelled words.
If more than one word is written in a box, count only the first word if spelled correctly.	Duplicate words.
Compound words such as <i>baseball</i> or <i>lunchbox</i> count as one word if spelled correctly.	Words at the top of the page such as <i>name</i> , <i>date</i> , and <i>teacher</i> .
Hyphenated words in one box count as one word if spelled correctly.	Names of people, including students in the class.
Count capitalized proper nouns other than people's names; count capitalized common nouns if spelled correctly.	Numbers such as 1, 2, 3 that are not spelled out as <i>one</i> , <i>two</i> , <i>three</i> .
When a singular and plural noun are both written, count both correct: <i>Cat</i> and <i>cats</i> each count as one word if written in different boxes.	Noncapitalized proper nouns such as <i>october</i> . All proper nouns must be capitalized.
Abbreviations: Count abbreviations used as words in everyday speech correct, such as <i>P.E.</i> (PE) or <i>T.V.</i> (TV).	Abbreviations: Do not count abbreviations such as <i>Dec.</i> for <i>December</i> .

3. *Complexity*: Mark the number of syllables above each correctly spelled word. Check the dictionary when in doubt, especially with a word such as *orange* that has two syllables.
  - Compound words written in one box count as one word with two or more syllables.
  - Words with two parts with one meaning such as *ice cream* or *hot dog* count as one word with two or more syllables each.
  - Hyphenated words in one box count as one word with two or more syllables.
4. Enter the number of words, number of correct words, and number of syllables in the appropriate columns on the following coding sheet.

*(continued)*

monitor and check his or her reading (Wasik, 1998). The CAFÉ provides the setting to do just that. It provides a closer look at students' word-writing fluency, accuracy, and complexity of their word usage. For now, teachers can use the CAFÉ to identify word-writing skills and help reinforce areas of weakness.

The findings not only inform the teacher but can also show students an inside look at the complexity of the vocabulary words they use and write. We suggest making students a part of the evaluation process to track the number of correct words along with the number of words with one, two, or three or more syllables. This provides a platform for giving them ownership of their own improvement in word writing and vocabulary use. If we want students who love words and are able to play

with and explore them, then student engagement with the CAFÉ is an invitation for students to recognize and think about word-writing fluency, accuracy, and complexity.

The Word Writing CAFÉ offers a way for teachers to see strengths and weaknesses in student word writing and to evaluate how their teaching is affecting student growth in writing complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Word writing is not the end goal; real writing is. It is hoped that teachers who help their students develop their word-writing skills will also see growth in their everyday writing assignments. Experience to date indicates that the CAFÉ has the potential to fill a gap as an objective writing assessment of a whole class at one time. We invite you to try it out.

**TABLE 6**  
**Steps in scoring the Word Writing CAFÉ (continued)**

**Coding sheet for recording number of words and syllables written**


Teacher's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name	Gender	Total words	Words correct	Number of one-syllable words	Number of two-syllable words	Number of three-syllable words	Number of four-syllable words	Number of five-syllable words	Number of six-syllable (or more) words

Coder's name: \_\_\_\_\_



To date, national benchmarks for the CAFÉ have not been determined at all grade levels and in diverse settings. If you are interested in participating in a nationwide study using the CAFÉ, please contact author Dorothy Leal at [leal@ohio.edu](mailto:leal@ohio.edu). In addition, the grade-level forms to try this strategy in your classroom can be found at the following Web address: <http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~leal/cafe.htm>.

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