



Study Guide for:

Some Consequences of Writing Assessment



A Project Developed by the LINCS Basic Skills Resource
Collection Staff for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of
Vocational and Adult Education

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Preface

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education funds the Literacy Information and Communication System (*LINCS*). *LINCS* is a national dissemination, resource gathering, and professional development system providing information on a wide variety of literacy-relevant topics, issues, and resources. One aspect of *LINCS* is the online Resource Collections: 1) Basic Skills (reading, writing, mathematics & numeracy, and health literacy); 2) Program Management (program improvement, learning disabilities, assessment, and transitions to postsecondary education); and 3) Workforce Competitiveness (English language acquisition, technology, and workforce education). You can find all three collections, as well as many other valuable resources, at the [LINCS](#) website.

The *LINCS* project team and expert reviewers have invested considerable time, energy, and expertise into selecting appropriate, evidence-based, high-quality resources for the collections. This rigorous process ensures that resources in the collections are based on solid, robust evidence or research. To learn more about the review process and see a list of the reviewers, go to the [LINCS Resource Collection Review Process](#).

About This Study Guide

This study guide is intended to help *LINCS* users become more familiar with a research resource from the Basic Skills Collection. Research articles or chapters may seem daunting to some practitioners; therefore, *LINCS* staff have taken a recent chapter on writing research and created a study guide for practitioners to use to contemplate and, perhaps, change their practice.

The topic for this study guide is writing assessment. The chapter [“Some Consequences of Writing Assessment”](#) was chosen to help build awareness of the impact that “high stakes” assessment may have on teachers’ approaches to teaching writing as mostly a technical and discrete skill. The chapter reinforces contemporary theories of writing as a socially mediated process that is best learned across different contexts using authentic assessments for practical and real writing opportunities. The study guide provides provocative questions for teachers to think about their current practice and apply what they have learned from this study guide and resource to their practice. As a reviewer of the study guide stated, “Overall, I think the chapter and the study guide will be helpful to teachers grappling with assessment questions.”

Research has shown that high stakes assessments in education influence what happens in the classroom in terms of curriculum, lessons, and instructional practices. The chapter “Some Consequences of Writing Assessment” highlights different types of high stakes writing assessments and the negative and positive changes those assessments may cause for teaching and learning.

Although the chapter focuses on high stakes assessment for secondary students, this study guide was developed to help you think about what is happening in your own adult education classroom or program in relation to the information in the chapter. This chapter and the study guide are most relevant for teachers of students heading toward postsecondary settings, but because adult educators must consider writing that relates to daily life as well (writing business letters, reports on the job, personal notes), the concept of authentic purposes for writing can be applicable to all students.

Intended Audience

The primary intended audience for this study guide is teachers, although administrators may also benefit by studying this research. Ideally, the study guide would be used in a study circle of teachers and/or administrators so that they could compare their current approaches to teaching writing and discuss the changes they have made as a result of what they have learned. Such a study circle could be done face-to-face or could be accomplished with others using social media, such as Wiggio or Ning. If a group cannot be formed to use this resource and study guide, an individual practitioner could work through the readings and activities as a self-directed study.

This study guide provides pre-reading and post-reading questions for each section. We encourage you to not only think about the answers but write them down in a learning log to reflect on later. We also hope you will try some of the recommended activities in the study guide.

Getting Started

To easily access the *LINCS* resources, you will need a computer with high-speed Internet access. Print one copy of this study guide and one copy of “[Some Consequences of Writing Assessment](#)” for each member of the study group.

If you are working in a group, set a time table. Determine which sections and activities you will complete before each session and decide who will facilitate each meeting.

If you are using this study guide as a self-study exercise, think about what you want to learn and why. Think also about others with whom you can share your experience. Keep your long-term goal in mind as you read and complete the exercises. To keep this study guide user friendly, all websites listed within the text are hyperlinked. If your computer cannot access the website via the hyperlink, you can find the website URL in the References on page 15.



Pre-reading Reflection

Think about these questions before you read the chapter:

1. How are students' writing abilities assessed in your program? In your classroom?
2. When/how often do these assessments take place?
3. How are the results used? Who sees the results?
4. What guides your writing instruction - assessment or curriculum or standards? Something else?
5. Are the standards, curriculum, and assessments used in your program aligned with each other?



Post-reading Reflection: Introduction--1st paragraph (page 47)

In the first paragraph, Murphy briefly discusses how views of learning have changed over time. To learn more about this, you may want to read the first part of another LINCS resource, [Research in Writing: Implications for Adult Literacy Education](#), in which Marilyn Gillespie discusses how the views of writing have changed and explains three views of writing - cognitive, sociocontextual, and new literacies (up to Composing in a Second Language, about six pages.)

The types of assessments chosen for writing depend on the view one has of writing - cognitive, sociocontextual, or new literacies. As you read Murphy's chapter "Some Consequences of Writing Assessment", write or talk about your responses to these questions:

1. Which view of writing instruction—cognitive, sociocontextual, new literacies—do the assessments discussed in the chapter represent?

2. What restrictions might this cause for teaching writing?



Pre-reading Reflection: Introduction (pages 47-50)

As you read the Introductory section, think about this question about the assessments that you are required to use:

1. How do the results from the assessments we typically use affect:
 - a. our students,
 - b. we as teachers,
 - c. our adult education program or school,
 - d. the state,
 - e. the nation,
 - f. policy-makers, and
 - g. testing firms?



Post-reading Reflection: Introduction (pages 47-50)

The first section of the chapter talks about the needs of various stakeholders and the influence those needs have on assessments and, consequently, curriculum. The stakeholders mentioned are students, government agencies, teachers, testing firms and their clients. Thinking about your instruction, write or talk about these questions:

1. How much influence do your students' goals for improving their writing have on what you teach and how you teach writing?
2. How much influence do your program's high stakes tests have on your teaching? How much influence should these tests have on your teaching?

Some of the **high stakes** tests in Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs are the General Educational Development credential (GED®), the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE), and the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS.) Results from these assessments are typically reported to the program and the state as outcome measures that indicate a program's quality and may be linked to future funding. **Low stakes** assessments are more formative and designed for the learner and teacher to chart writing progress and design lessons and activities to improve writing. In other words, low stakes assessments are anything done in class to learn more about students' writing. Write about or talk about these questions:

1. Does your program have any low stakes writing assessments?
2. Do you use any low stakes writing assessments in your classroom?
3. What do you use and how do you use the results?

Activity: Use this table to chart what you want to know about students' writing and high stakes and low stakes assessments that are used. Where are the gaps in the information you get from the assessments currently in use?

Student Name	What I want to know about his/her writing	High Stakes Assessment Used	Low Stakes Assessment Used	What Do I Need to Know to Improve Writing?



Pre-reading Reflection: Multiple Choice Tests of Written Expression (pages 50-51) and Backwash from Multiple Choice Tests of Writing (pages 51-52)

As you read these two sections think about these questions:

1. Do you currently use multiple choice tests to assess student writing? If so, when? How often?
2. What writing instruction do you use in your classroom? Does a multiple choice test adequately capture the results of that instruction?



Post-reading Reflection: Multiple Choice Tests of Written Expression (pages 50-51) and Backwash from Multiple Choice Tests of Writing (pages 51-52)

Many ABE programs use the TABE or CASAS which assess student writing ability with multiple choice tests—indirect assessments. To supplement the information from the TABE or CASAS, some teachers collect a short writing sample from their students.

Write or talk about your responses to these questions:

1. Do you or teachers you know collect writing samples from new students?
2. How do these samples compare with what the multiple choice tests show?
3. Does the performance on one reflect the performance on the other? Or is there a discrepancy?
4. What are your students' goals for improving their writing other than passing the GED test?

Activity: If you don't collect writing samples, collect some from your new students. Compare student performance on the writing samples to their performance on multiple choice tests. What did you find?

The chapter talks about two influences from high-stakes, large-scale multiple choice writing tests:

- Actual writing begins to disappear from the curriculum.
- The curriculum takes the form of the test (teach to the test).

Write or talk about your responses to these questions:

1. Has your program experienced backwash from high stakes multiple-choice tests in terms of writing disappearing from the curriculum or the writing curriculum taking on the form of the test?
2. Has your writing instruction changed because of testing requirements? If so, how has it changed?
3. What has been the effect of this change on students' writing test scores? On students' actual writing? On student satisfaction?

According to the studies discussed in this section, teachers will focus on grammar and mechanics when multiple choice assessments are high stakes. What effect might this have on students' writing? In their publication, [Writing Next](#) (a statistical meta-analysis of writing research), Graham and Perin (2007) found “that traditional grammar instruction is unlikely to help improve the quality of students' writing.” Note the conflict of research and practice.

Finally, write or talk about this question in terms of the potential of multiple choice backwash:

1. What effect do you think the backwash from multiple choice testing has on students' preparation for the types of writing they may be required in real life:
 - on the job,
 - in postsecondary education,
 - as parents,

- as community members?



Pre-reading Reflection: Backwash from Direct Assessments of Writing (pages 52-53) and Backwash from Impromptu Writing Tests (pages 54-56)

Multiple choice assessments show only students' ability to answer questions about writing, not their ability to write. The only way to assess students' writing ability is to have them produce pieces of writing. As you read these sections think about these questions:

1. What opportunities do you give your students to write in your classroom? How often do students write?
2. What feedback do you provide on their writing?
3. What rubrics do you use to help guide students' writing and to assess their writing?



Post-reading Reflection: Backwash from Direct Assessments of Writing (pages 52-53) and Backwash from Impromptu Writing Tests (pages 54-56)

The GED® test requires test takers to write an impromptu essay on a given prompt in 45 minutes. As stated in the article, one backwash from impromptu writing tests is the teaching of a formula for writing an essay. In ABE, this formula is usually the 5-paragraph essay. The formula gives students a structure for passing the GED test but may not help them with other kinds of writing tasks, especially those in the workplace or postsecondary education. The authors of *Writing Next* (2007) suggest:

Modern writing instruction in the United States recognizes that students need to write clearly and for a wide variety of real-life purposes. Thus, *flexibility* is now perhaps the most prized goal of writing instruction because the fully proficient writer can adapt to different contexts, formats, and purposes for writing.

Most contexts of life (school, the workplace, and the community) call for writing skills, and each context makes overlapping but not identical demands. Proficient writers can adapt their writing to its context. Writing is also produced in different formats, such as sentences, lists, outlines, paragraphs, essays, letters, and books. Proficient writers can flexibly move among most, if not all, of these formats.

Proficient writers are also able to move among purposes that range from writing solely for themselves (as in a personal diary) to communicating with an external audience (pg. 22).

Write or talk about the following questions in terms of these sections and the excerpt from *Writing Next*:

1. Do you teach several forms or genres of writing? Writing for a variety of audiences and purposes? How do you decide which ones? If not, how would you start?
2. Do the essays you teach prepare students for writing tasks in the workplace or post-secondary education? If so, how? If not, what could you do to prepare them for those situations?

Scoring an essay is more difficult than scoring a multiple choice test. Often rubrics are used as an aid in assigning a score to a student's writing. Essay scorers for the GED® test use a 4-point rubric to score the essay. This rubric can be found at <http://proliteracyednet.org/downloads/77GEDWritingRubric.pdf>

Adult educators often use this rubric to assess the essays of students preparing to take the GED® test. However, the GED® essay rubric may be of limited value in assessing other kinds of writing. There are other rubrics that can be used to score a piece of written work, for example from the National Adult Literacy Database: Canada's Literacy and Essential Skills Network: <http://www.nald.ca/library/learning/btg/ed/evaluation/writing.htm>

Activity: Examine different rubrics and think about which ones would be most useful for you and your students.

Some teachers work with their students to develop their own rubric for writing. Have your students talk about what makes good writing and develop a writing rubric for your classroom. Use one or two of the rubrics above as models.

When teachers teach to various kinds of assessments - multiple choice, impromptu essays - students' real life purposes for improving their writing may get pushed aside. In [Affecting Change in Literacy Practices: Impact of Two Dimensions of Instruction](#), Victoria Purcell-Gates, et al. (2000) explored what happens to students' home literacy

practices when students' real life purposes for writing are an instructional consideration. After a careful statistical analysis of their data, Purcell-Gates and her fellow researchers found that there was a relationship between "the offering of authentic literacy activities and texts in school and increases in types and/or frequencies of literacy practices ... in people's lives outside of school" (p. 80). *Authentic* was defined as texts and purposes for reading and writing that students would be engaged in outside of the classroom, in their homes, at work, and communities.

Getting students ready to write proficiently in real life contexts may require writing for a variety of purposes, especially authentic purposes. Jacobson, et al. (YEAR) offers suggestions for incorporating authentic purposes for writing into instruction in the section titled "Thinking About Purpose" pgs. 56-58 in chapter 3 of [*Creating Authentic Materials and Activities for the Adult Literacy Classroom*](#).

Activity: After reading this section, interview your students and make a list of the kinds of writing they do in their lives outside of the classroom. Then write down some ideas on how you could help your students improve their writing ability in those contexts. Note: The next section of Murphy's chapter talks about Portfolios. This activity could carry into that section.



Pre-reading Reflection: Backwash from Portfolios (pages 56-58)

Jacobson et al. (2003), gives the following description of portfolios:

It is difficult to provide a simple definition of portfolio assessment, since teachers use portfolios in a variety of ways. In general, a portfolio is a folder or a box in which students store significant pieces of class work. Students are often in charge of deciding what work should be included in the portfolio, though teachers may require students to put specific pieces into the portfolio as well (pg. 92).

As you read this section think about these questions:

1. Do your students have portfolios of their work? If so, how do you and they use them?
2. Many ABE students engage in writing activities at home or in their communities. These activities include journals, letters, e-mails, poetry, and songs. What kinds of writing do your students do outside of the classroom? How might these be incorporated into a portfolio?

Activity: If you are not familiar with your students' writing activities outside of the classroom, find out what they are. How could you use this to inform your writing instruction?



Post-reading Reflection: Backwash from Portfolios (pages 56-58)

Write or talk about these questions:

1. If your students keep portfolios, which type of portfolio described in this section do you use: standardized or more open?
2. How do you decide what kinds of writing to include?
3. If you don't already use portfolios, how would you start?
4. Who would decide what to include? You, your students, or both?
5. What would be included?

Jacobson et al. (2003) noted that portfolios can include a photo of a book that a student read cover to cover, writing pieces, photo copies of articles or any other reading, letters written or received. Portfolios should include significant and noteworthy artifacts that reflect progress.

Finally, write or talk about these questions about portfolios:

1. If you have students keep a writing portfolio, how do you evaluate their writing? GED rubric? Other rubrics?
2. Do the students have the opportunity to evaluate their own writing? What tools do they use?



Pre-reading Reflection: Grammar and Mechanics Instruction

Think about the skills that you mainly teach when you are teaching writing to your students.

Although not addressed directly in the article, grammar and mechanics are a part of writing instruction and assessment. How do you teach your students grammar and mechanics. [Writing Next](#) (2007) "A Note about Grammar Instruction" provides a research-based answer:

Grammar instruction in the studies reviewed involved the explicit and systematic teaching of the parts of speech and structure of sentences. The meta-analysis found an effect for this type of instruction for students across the full range of ability, but surprisingly, this effect was negative. This negative effect was small, but it was statistically significant, **indicating that traditional grammar instruction is unlikely to help improve the quality of students' writing** [emphasis added] .. Such findings raise serious questions about some educators' enthusiasm for traditional grammar instruction as a focus of writing instruction for adolescents. However, other instructional methods, such as sentence combining, provide an effective alternative to traditional grammar instruction, as this approach improves students' writing quality while at the same time enhancing syntactic skills. In addition, a recent study (Fearn & Farnan, 2005) found that teaching students to focus on the function and practical application of grammar within the context of writing (versus teaching grammar as an independent activity) produced strong and positive effects on students' writing. Overall, the findings on grammar instruction suggest that, although teaching grammar is important, alternative procedures, such as sentence combining, are more effective than traditional approaches for improving the quality of students' writing (p. 21).



Post-reading Reflection: Grammar and Mechanics Instruction

Write or talk about these questions:

1. How do you decide what areas of writing your students need to work on?
2. With *Writing Next* findings in mind, would you need to re-structure the way you teach mechanics and grammar? If so, how would you go about it?



Pre-reading Reflection: Conclusion (pages 58-61)

At the beginning of this study guide you were asked who the stakeholders of writing assessment are for your program. Stakeholders could include: students, government agencies, teachers, testing firms. Think about the results each of these stakeholders wants and how best to get those results, as you read the Conclusion.



Post-reading Reflection: Conclusion (pages 58-61)

The conclusion provides provocative comments about writing instruction and writing assessment. Talk or write about your reactions to the following:

1. How do you feel about the following quotations from the article?

“... the efficiency in current testing practices is greatly outweighed by the cost of using a system that has low systemic validity -- one that has a negative impact on learning and teaching” (p. ??).

“...whether consequences of an assessment are viewed as good or bad depends on the values and beliefs of the stakeholder. ...not all stakeholders hold the same beliefs and values” (p. ??).

2. How can you reconcile or balance the need for efficient, cost-effective assessment with the need for assessment that aligns with research-based views on literacy and learning?

In the conclusion of “Some Consequences of Writing Assessment,” Murphy discusses authentic writing assessments. In chapter 5 of *Creating Authentic Materials and Activities for the Adult Literacy Classroom*, the authors discuss how to implement authentic assessment into the classroom *along with* required standardized testing. Since assessment and instruction are so closely linked, changes in one lead to changes in the other. After reading *Creating Authentic Materials and Activities for the Adult Literacy Classroom*, write or talk about the following:

1. What steps do you need to take to authentically assess your students’ writing.
2. If you wanted to change your writing instruction, how would you start?
3. What three important insights have you have gained as a result of reading the chapter and participating in the teacher reflection. For each, write an impact statement.
4. Are there changes you will make in your practice as a result? What are they?
5. What further questions do you have about the effects of assessment on the teaching of writing?

Activity: Develop an action plan to make a change in your writing instruction that takes into account your students’ purposes for writing in their lives, and how to authentically assess their writing. What are your goals? What steps will you take to

achieve these goals? What materials or resources will you need? How will you evaluate the impact of these changes?

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