

Literacy as a Big Goal: Standards and Diagnostics

Chapter Two

I. Reading, Writing, and Oral Communication Standards

II. The All-Important Role of Diagnostics in the Quest for Literacy

No matter what grade level or subject matter you are assigned, your first order of business is becoming familiar with what you are responsible for teaching to your students. An excellent literacy teacher invests time learning what his or her students should be able to do by the end of the year so that the teacher can plan backwards to create a sequence of steps over the course of the year. As we have outlined in *Instructional Planning & Delivery*, these same teachers diagnose their students to calibrate their instructional pace and begin instruction at the appropriate level.

This chapter focuses on these two components of literacy instruction planning. First, what are appropriate literacy goals for a particular set of students? We will survey the general literacy-related expectations and standards for each grade level, Kindergarten through fifth. Second, how do you diagnose your students' current literacy abilities? We will introduce you to various types of diagnostic tools that your district might use and that you will have access to at the summer institute and in your regional offices.

I. Reading, Writing, and Oral Communication Standards

As you read this, you probably do not know precisely what grade level you will be teaching this fall. Given the immense structural, budgetary, and organizational challenges facing the under-resourced schools where we place teachers, even those of you who think you know your placement may find changes waiting for you when you reach your region.

In Part I, we familiarize you with the whole range of elementary literacy standards, from Kindergarten through fifth grade. Not only is this broad preparation prudent in cases of a change in your teaching assignment, but having a strong foundation in literacy standards across grade levels will also make you a much stronger teacher in your own grade level. First, it will give you a bird's-eye view of the educational landscape in which your students are placed. Knowing what they have learned in previous grades and what they are expected to learn in the future makes your job more meaningful and helps you to understand how crucial it is that your students master all of your grade level standards. Second, as you will soon become aware, no classroom is filled with students who are at the same level. While your door may say, "Welcome to Third Grade," within your classroom you will have students who range in ability dramatically, across several grade levels of standards. It is your responsibility to catch your students up to state and district standards, so you must be knowledgeable in all elementary standards to recognize what gaps need to be filled in. Of course, these rough estimations of the learning standards for each grade will ultimately be trumped by your specific state or district standards. You can expect, however, that those specific standards will be closely aligned with what we have listed here.

We have included a detailed instructional scope and sequence in chapter three, and comprehensive lists of what students at each grade level are expected to learn are in the **Elementary Literacy Toolkit** (pp. 1-5: "Elementary Literacy Standards"—this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet). ✖ But here we will provide a summarized overview of those more detailed lists. The summaries that follow of what students in each grade level are expected to know have been adapted from several sources, including Kendall and Marzano's comprehensive survey of standards and benchmarks for

Literacy as a Big Goal

education across the country,¹³ various state standards, the work of reading researcher Louisa Moats,¹⁴ and the National Research Council's *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success*.¹⁵

Kindergarten—Setting the Foundation for Reading and Writing

According to the National Research Council, Kindergarten teachers are responsible for two over-arching goals:

- By the end of the year, Kindergarteners should have a solid foundation in **book/print awareness**.
- By the end of the year, Kindergarteners should be comfortable with and have a positive association with the fundamental concept that we *learn from* print.

More specifically, these overarching goals require that a teacher focus on the format of books and other print resources. By the year's end, Kindergarteners have learned to identify and use the parts of a book (such as the front and back covers and title page) and know that print is organized and read in a consistent manner (from left-to-right and top-to-bottom). And, though they are not expected to become fluent readers by the end of the year, Kindergarteners should come to understand that print carries meaning and that they are rapidly becoming capable of determining what that meaning is.

Be sure to check out student work samples like those supplied by the Board of Education. It's vitally important to gauge your expectations in terms of concrete examples. You will be better equipped to plan lessons, set the tone in the classroom, and teach toward big goals. I have found that my class will only perform as well as I expect it to. My first year, I had little idea what Kindergartners should know, and was happy to see any progress. The second year, I expected a little bit more – and my kids' performance reflected that. Now, my children are reading on a first grade level in January.

**Laura Gutmann, New York City '02
PhD in Education Candidate, University of
North Carolina Chapel Hill**

To this end, the teaching of both **phonological and phonemic awareness** and **phonics and the alphabetic principle** are very important in Kindergarten. In the phonological awareness arena, students should begin to understand that sentences are made up of words, and that words contain both syllables and individual sounds, or phonemes. They should be able to hear and produce rhyming and alliteration, as well as begin to segment and blend simple words (to break the word *cat* down into the sounds /c... a... t/ and put those sounds together again to say *cat*). Students should also be able to recognize, name, and easily write the individual letters of the alphabet (both capital and lowercase), and know their corresponding sounds. They should begin to use this letter/sound knowledge, attaching letters to the beginning and ending sounds of spoken words. For instance, when they attempt to write *dog*, they should be able to hear that the word begins with /d/ and ends with /g/ and use the letters *d* and *g* to spell the word.

Additionally, the Kindergarten teacher has the responsibility of introducing students to the concept that books and other print materials are sources of information. Much of students' future education will build on a child's receptivity to learning from print. Thus, one key task of the kindergarten teacher is to build students' motivation to read books by building their foundational reading skills and exposing them to a wide variety of texts through the Read Aloud.

¹³ Kendall, John and Robert Marzano. *Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education, 3rd Edition*. Arlington, VA: ASCD, September 2000.

¹⁴ Moats, Louisa Cook. *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2000.

¹⁵ Burns, M. Susan et al, Eds. *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999.

First Grade—Major Steps toward Independent Reading

While children are in fact “learning to read” throughout elementary school, for many students the first grade is where they know enough to actually sit down with a book and decode and comprehend words on their own. As the National Research Council explains, “First grade is the time when children bring together the many language and literacy skills they have been attaining—book and print awareness, phonemic awareness, letter and word knowledge, background information about different topics—and start getting comfortable with the conventions of associating letters and sounds.” For many children, first grade is the time when they move from “pretend reading” to conventional reading.

By the end of the year, first graders should have a firm grasp on the alphabetic principle; they should increase their understanding of sound-spelling relationships, by learning vowel teams, diphthongs, *r*-controlled vowels, consonant digraphs, and consonant blends.¹⁶ First graders should blend the letter sounds throughout a word and spell most one-syllable words accurately, as well as common word endings like *-ing* and *-ed*. With a text on their independent level, first graders should read 60-70 words per minute. Further, these students should become comfortable summarizing and identifying the main idea of texts that they have read.

In writing, students should be able to plan and organize their ideas and compose readable drafts with some degree of phonetic spelling. First graders should write complete sentences that employ basic punctuation and capitalization.

Thus, the literacy advancements made by students in first grade are vast. For a more comprehensive overview of first grade standards, see the **Elementary Literacy Toolkit** (p. 2: “Elementary Literacy Standards”); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖ Of course, a reality of teaching first grade (and any elementary grade, for that matter) is that you will encounter a wide range of student ability levels in your classroom. A first grade teacher may have some students who can match only a few letters to their sounds and others who can read on their own. In first grade, all of the pieces of literacy that have been practiced in Kindergarten begin to come together. Children become, in a real sense, independent readers.

Second and Third Grade

Unfortunately, disparate quality of past literacy instruction begins to evidence itself quite dramatically in second and third grade. That is, second and third grade teachers are likely to have some students who read independently and others who are still mastering basic phonemic awareness and understanding of the alphabetic principle. The mid-elementary teacher’s challenge therefore is to quickly identify those students who need remediation in the basics of phonics and the alphabetic principle and simultaneously move all students forward with two key goals:

- Building automatic word recognition, spelling skills, and reading fluency
- Improving comprehension by building knowledge of words, text structures, and conscious strategies required for understanding and using text

More specifically, this means that by the end of the year, second graders should be able to recognize a variety of syllable types and accurately decode regular multi-syllable words. These students should read

¹⁶ Vowel teams: two or more vowels that create one speech sound (the /ea/ in team).

Diphthong: a speech sound that begins with one vowel sound and moves to another within the same syllable (the /oi/ in *noise* and the /ou/ in *mouse*).

R-controlled vowels: sounds in which the *r* influences the pronunciation of the preceding vowel (such as *car* or *fur*).

Consonant digraphs: two letters that represent one sound (such as /sh/ and /th/).

Consonant blends: two- or three-letter consonants that are blended together quickly (such as /bl/ or /squ/).

Literacy as a Big Goal

more than 80 words per minute and should use a wide variety of reading strategies (like summarizing, questioning, and making connections) in their own reading. Further, second graders should begin to make inferences as they read and should be able to recall many facts and details of both fiction and nonfiction texts. In their writing, second graders produce a variety of compositions (including stories, reports, and correspondence) and are able to spell compound words, words with endings like *-ed* and *-ing*, vowel team words, and words containing variant patterns with increasing accuracy. By the end of second grade, students should be able to write one complete paragraph.

During the third grade, students should be honing those same decoding and comprehension skills with more difficult words and texts and more complex compositions. Third graders should begin to use the structure of words (common roots, prefixes, and suffixes) and context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words. These students will begin to read longer works of fiction independently—with fluency and comprehension. These students write consistently in paragraph form and are able to combine information from a number of sources to produce written products that are longer, more organized, and more descriptive. They are able to apply rules of grammar and mechanics in writing. Third grade students learn to write in cursive.

You will probably hear the expression that during the second and third grades, students are making the transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” For a more complete list of second and third grade accomplishments, see again the **Elementary Literacy Toolkit** (pp. 3-4: “Elementary Literacy Standards”). ✖

Fourth and Fifth Grade

The primary goals in the upper elementary grades are (1) increased reading accuracy and fluency along with (2) more complex and independent use of both reading comprehension and writing skills and strategies. At this level, word recognition centers on word origins, root words, prefixes and suffixes, and vocabulary. Comprehension should become more independent, as students learn to monitor their own understanding of texts and implement various strategies when meaning is lost. Students access the whole range of literature, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, historical fiction, etc. There is a strong emphasis on inference, as students are expected to draw conclusions from the text based on evidence rather than on actual statements. There is also much more use of figurative language in upper elementary reading, and students must rely on their knowledge of similes, metaphors, and symbolism to get the most out of a text.

Writing instruction shifts from mechanics to style. Fourth and fifth graders use descriptive language and more complex sentence structure in their writing. As students advance through the upper grades, their compositions move from paragraphs to essays. They learn to research, organize, and effectively structure a variety of written forms. These students should be developing a strong sense of the process of writing, independently using pre-writing strategies (such as graphic organizers, outlines, and story maps) to develop ideas. Students edit written work, looking for grammar and format issues. Students continue to write in a whole range of formats, including narratives, poetry, expository compositions, letters, and autobiographies.

Upper elementary instruction straddles content and literacy. The final years of students’ elementary school education improve their ability to understand the meaning of text and express their thoughts and opinions in more complex written forms, preparing them for the content-heavy courses they will face in middle school. For a more comprehensive overview of fourth and fifth grade standards, see again the **Elementary Literacy Toolkit** (p. 5: “Elementary Literacy Standards”). ✖

II. The All-Important Role of Diagnostics in the Quest for Literacy

One of the primary purposes for a teacher's intimate knowledge of literacy standards is to inform the teacher's diagnosis of his or her students' literacy skills. As we discussed in *Instructional Planning & Delivery* (if you haven't read the first two chapters of that text, you might want to view them now), diagnosing your students' abilities and progress is a necessary foundation for achieving the significant academic gains that your students must make in order to catch up with students in more privileged communities. Excellent teachers of literacy recognize the high returns that come from careful and constant assessment of their students' literacy skills.

To teach literacy as effectively and efficiently as you can, you need to know what your students already know so that you can build on that knowledge, and avoid reviewing material your students have already mastered so that you can fill in any gaps that may be present in students' literacy development. Diagnostics are initial assessments that determine students' current literacy abilities, providing you with a starting line from which to measure students' growth over time. Because literacy plays such a central role in all areas of education, it is essential that elementary teachers follow the constant cycle of diagnosis, instruction, and assessment that is the crucible of excellent instruction. To succeed as a teacher of literacy, you must diagnose your students' literacy abilities at the beginning of the year and then continually assess and chart their progress throughout the year.

Initial Diagnoses: Determining the Starting Line

In this section, we are going to dive more deeply into the assessments and diagnostics that you will need to use at the very beginning of the school year in order to know where your students are beginning in relation to the ambitious goals you are setting for their achievement. Perhaps the most obvious benefit of such an initial diagnosis is that it shows you where to begin your instruction. That is, you might learn that the overwhelming majority of your fifth grade students can decode one and two syllable words, but stumble over words that are any more complex. Information of this type will inform your instructional planning, making it more focused and efficient. In our fifth grade example, you would know to focus your instruction on multi-syllable decoding, which would include syllable types and syllable division, as well as word parts (such as prefixes, suffixes, and roots) that will help your students break large words into comprehensible chunks to decode. Having this diagnostic information will also serve as a valuable baseline to which you can compare your students' progress later in the year.

Moreover, teachers come away from the diagnostic process with a much clearer sense of the challenges they will face related to variance in student knowledge. While the wide range of student abilities and knowledge found in a given class of students may be shocking, unsettling, and initially overwhelming, much more disturbing is the prospect of attempting to teach students at such varied levels without even knowing that this variance exists. Thus, one reason to carefully diagnose students' literacy skills at the beginning of the year is to immediately begin thinking about how to best differentiate instruction so as to maximize the academic gains of all students.

So, How Do I Diagnose My Students' Literacy Skills?

Understanding the importance of performing an initial diagnosis of your students' literacy abilities is just the first step. Next, you must determine the diagnostic method you will use. Many districts or schools have a particular approach that you will be required to use in the fall. Others leave this decision up to individual grade levels or teachers. No matter what position you find yourself in, it is important to have an understanding of the most common diagnostic tools available. Even in the lower grades, your school will likely have access to standardized test data that can serve as a useful source of information about students' literacy skills. The breadth and depth of the information in that data varies from state to state and district to district. In many cases, however, teachers find that the investment of time and energy it

Literacy as a Big Goal

may take to get that data for your students provides specific insights into students' strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to standardized tests, there are many other assessment tools that can help fill the gaps left by incomplete standardized test data. Here we will briefly introduce you to some of these types of assessments. Among the most useful forms of diagnostics that you might encounter are:

- **Phonological Awareness Tests.** These diagnostic tools measure students' phonological awareness skills and should be given to all Kindergarteners and first graders, as well as second graders who are experiencing reading difficulties. Though there is variation between phonological awareness tests, most give you insight into a student's specific levels of phonological awareness: can the student hear and count the syllables in a word, identify and count various sounds in a word, and identify words that rhyme and don't rhyme? The teacher gives the tests to the whole class or a small group of students. You will have access to a Phonological Awareness Screening Test, found in CORE's *Assessing Reading: Multiple Measures*, at the summer institute and in your regional offices.
- **Phonics Surveys.** To measure students' ability to decode words, teachers often give a phonics survey to individual students. Though specific tests vary, most measure students' ability to name letters, identify the corresponding sounds for consonants and vowels, and decode single and multi-syllable words containing a variety of patterns. For instance, this assessment asks a student to read from a list of real and pseudo words, such as *sip* and *vop* to see if they can read words with short vowel sounds, and *lute* and *joad* to identify long vowel spellings. The teacher is able to use the results of this diagnostic to determine the phonics needs of individual students, and to tailor his or her instruction accordingly. Again, you will have access to such an assessment through CORE's *Assessing Reading: Multiple Measures*.
- **Qualitative Spelling Inventory.** These diagnostic tools measure spelling skills and developmental levels of phonics knowledge at each grade level, Kindergarten through fifth. To administer this assessment, give students a series of progressively more challenging words (meaning you begin with single-syllable, short vowel words like *bed* and progress to two syllable words with unusual spelling patterns like *hoping* and *squirreℓ*) and compare their spellings to the stages of spelling development. Analyzing a student's spelling, in particular the mistakes he or she makes, will shed light on his or her knowledge of sound-symbol correspondence. This sort of assessment can also be easily administered on a class-wide level, and can be used to get a general sense of your students' phonics skills and their understanding of letter-sound relationships. A "Sample Qualitative Spelling Inventory" is included in the **Elementary Literacy Toolkit** (p. 6), which can be found at the Resource Exchange on TFiANet, and another is contained in CORE's *Assessing Reading: Multiple Measures*. ✕

I use the Elementary Spelling Inventory from Words Their Way (by Bear et al.) which has been very helpful in guiding my spelling and phonics instruction. This assessment helps me determine which stage of spelling development my students are in and provides activities and lessons to reach those varied levels. The Elementary Spelling Inventory helped me discover that most of my students this year needed instruction in long vowel patterns. So before doing more complex patterns, we started with long vowels.

**Laura Feeney, Bay Area '01
Senior Officer - Leading Learning,
Teach First**

- **Word Lists.** Finally, you can ask individual students to read from a Word List, which contains short lists of progressively more challenging words. When a student says a word incorrectly or skips it, the teacher records that as a “miscall.” By noting the grade level of the word list where a student begins to have a critical mass of miscalls (different tests have different definitions of that “critical mass,” most say to stop when a student reads five words for a grade level incorrectly), the teacher can approximate the grade level of the student’s word recognition abilities. A sample Word List can be found below, and another, called the “San Diego Quick,” is contained in CORE’s *Assessing Reading: Multiple Measures*.

Pre-primer	Primer	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4
it	now	school	neighbor	vegetables	reasonable
is	like	birthday	strong	poured	human
to	was	many	kitchen	thirsty	government
come	run	her	country	happiness	abandon
said	children	again	always	interested	junior
little	all	frog	blow	breathless	typewriter
for	but	worked	mouth	calves	security
here	around	place	corner	lever	bushel
red	white	there	wheels	deciding	promote
want	into	nest	because	wealthy	embark

Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10
admission	particular	imperative	philosophical	dialogue	demitasse
social	triumphant	fundamental	buoyant	belligerent	peremptory
governor	conservation	antique	abhor	figurative	longevity
knowledge	foreigner	dormitory	masquerade	gregarious	marinade
navigation	wrought	functional	antiquity	avaricious	corpuscle
scientific	opinion	anatomy	celestial	expenditure	philanthropy
quality	immortal	proposition	perpendicular	sympathize	deterioration
improvement	estimate	reluctant	taciturn	monarchy	exhilarated
educational	bacteria	idealist	pessimistic	intercede	apportionment
youth	biscuit	enthusiastic	indoctrinate	ultimatum	patronizing

Source: *Word Recognition Grade Placement Form A, Inventory of Early Development—Revised*.

- **Comprehension Retell Assessment.** As the name implies, this assessment approach requires students to retell a story to the teacher that the student has read. By recording what aspects of the story the child recognizes and retells, the teacher establishes a picture of the student’s literacy skills. When a Comprehension Retell Assessment is done as part of a **Qualitative Reading Inventory**, or **QRI**, the teacher can measure a variety of skills—such as reading comprehension, fluency, and accuracy—to determine a student’s general literacy level. There are multiple specific procedures for this type of assessment, and multiple published versions, but QRIs often involve a student reading a graded text out loud while the teacher records speed and accuracy; after the reading, the student responds to comprehension questions posed by the teacher. Typically, a QRI requires 30-45 minutes to administer to an individual student.
- **Reading Habits Checklist.** Another relatively simple approach to assessing your students’ literacy skills is through a “reading habits checklist.” This is a table of characteristics of strong readers (discussed more in chapter six) that you can keep on a clipboard and fill out through informal observations and evaluations over a period of time. Those might include, for example, staying focused, note-taking skills, skimming skills, etc. You can keep this on a clipboard and fill it out through informal observations and evaluations over a period of time. Your students’ literacy strengths and weaknesses will begin to emerge as patterns on the grid.

Literacy as a Big Goal

- **Timed Reading Exercise.** To measure a student’s fluency (also called oral reading rate), you would conduct a Timed Reading Exercise with a text on this student’s independent reading level (discussed in “Searching for the Independent Reading Level” below). A Timed Reading Exercise is relatively easy to administer.
 1. First, **choose a text or passage on the student’s independent level** with at least 100 words.
 2. Before you begin, **give the student a quick overview** of the passage and explain what you are asking her to do. *“Taylor, we’re going to spend about 5 minutes measuring your reading fluency – remember that means how well you can read like you talk. We’re working on improving your reading fluency because if you have good fluency, your brain has the space to understand what you read. The passage you’re going to read today is about the Gold Rush, one of the factors that caused westward expansion in the United States. Please begin reading it at a rate that is comfortable for you. If you make a mistake, you can correct yourself. If you come to a word you don’t know, try to figure it out on your own. Does that sound ok? Alright, go ahead.”*
 3. Decide how many minutes you want the student to read (between one and five minutes). At the appointed time, stop the student. Tally the total number of words read (correct or incorrect) and divide it by the number of minutes. This result is their **oral reading rate**, in words per minute, for the text that they read.
 4. You might also rate the **students’ overall fluency/prosody** by placing students into one of three levels:
 - a. Level 1: student reads a word at a time in a halting manner, often has to sound out words, and reads without expression or attention to punctuation.
 - b. Level 2: reads with some expression and attention to punctuation, may stop to sound out some words or repeat words.
 - c. Level 3: reads smoothly with good expression, phrasing, and attention to punctuation; any repetition of words is to self-correct mistakes (which are generally rare).¹⁷

I use several diagnostics in combination with each other—principally, the SRI (Scholastic Reading Inventory), a computerized test that gives a quick-and-dirty look at the approximate level of each student, and the QRI (Qualitative Reading Inventory). The QRI gives an amazingly in-depth look at each student’s “level” with varying levels of texts and knowledge backgrounds. It takes a while to administer (about 45 minutes a kid) but is the BEST use of time. It gives a wealth of information: students’ issues with fluency, phonics, comprehension, texts of different genres. Once I administer the QRI and know where all the students are at, I form guided reading groups and make instructional plans for each student for the year.

Beth Napleton, New York City ’00
Senior Managing Director of Institute, Los Angeles
Teach For America

¹⁷ Modified from Beers, Kyleene. *When Kids Can’t Read: What Teachers Can Do*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003, p. 211.

Diagnosing Writing

Given its fundamentally “qualitative” nature, diagnosing and assessing writing skills poses special challenges. Most teachers—even at the kindergarten and first grade level—find that rubrics are an invaluable tool. While we will not rehash the purposes and construction of rubrics here (see the “Student Assessment” chapter of the *Instructional Planning & Delivery* text), we do want to point you to several excellent tools for evaluating your students’ writing.

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) has created a “Beginning Writer’s Continuum” that is useful for evaluating even Kindergarteners’ and first-graders’ writing.¹⁸ This rubric, which helps you rate your students’ writing according to its ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions, allows you to see that a level one writer (classified as “experimenting”) uses scribbles to represent ideas and dictates a story to the teacher, while a level four writer (deemed “capable”) is able to tell a story that makes a point and includes ideas that are generally on topic.

That rubric is based on an excellent framework for assessing elementary students’ writing. As the NWREL explains, you should approach writing evaluation systematically, using the rubric-creation process to delineate clearly what you are looking for in students’ writing. As mentioned above, the NWREL suggests that you evaluate writing with respect to the following traits:

- **Ideas.** You should evaluate student writing for its content, of course. Is the message clear?
- **Organization.** Elementary teachers spend a considerable amount of time thinking about how to teach the organization of a piece of writing. They use graphic organizers, story maps and outlining techniques to teach students the form and structure of various genres of text. You should evaluate your students’ writing on those factors as well.
- **Voice.** This criterion becomes more and more clear as students’ literacy skills develop. Whenever possible, you should evaluate student writing for the student’s personal engagement in the process. Is there a personal tone and flavor to the piece that shows that it came from this student?
- **Word Choice.** Word choice, of course, is the use of rich, colorful, precise language that communicates not just in a functional way, but also in a way that moves and enlightens the reader. With age-appropriate adjustments, we should always encourage students to think carefully about word choice.
- **Sentence Fluency.** You should also judge students’ writing on its fluency. Sentence fluency is the rhythm and flow of the language, the sound of word patterns, and the way in which the writing plays to the ear, not just to the eye. How does it sound when read aloud? Is it choppy and rambling, or rhythmic and graceful? Having explicit discussions about sentence fluency, even with novice writers, helps develop students’ habits of writing with the listener in mind.
- **Conventions.** Perhaps the easiest criteria for assessing writing are the mechanical correctness of the piece: spelling, grammar and usage, paragraphing (indenting at the appropriate spots), use of capitals, and punctuation. Writing that is strong in conventions has been proofread and edited with care. You might decide to focus on different areas of writing mechanics for different projects, depending on what has been the focus of your direct instruction.

What are “Anchor Papers”?

“Anchor Papers” are a series of written products (essays, letters, or paragraphs, for example) of varying levels of quality that a teacher can use as benchmarks against which to judge the level of writing proficiency of his or her students. Anchor papers usually include essays (or some other written product) of at least four different levels. See “Anchor Papers” in the **Elementary Literacy Toolkit** (pp. 8-11); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFSANet. ✖

¹⁸ “Beginning Writer’s Continuum.” Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Library. Online at <http://www.nwrel.org>.

Literacy as a Big Goal

- **Presentation.** Finally, you should evaluate student writing for its “presentation” value. This idea goes beyond handwriting to the way the product is packaged.

For a more in-depth look at this rubric, see the **Elementary Literacy Toolkit** (p. 7: “5-Trait Assessment for Beginning Writers”); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFSANet. Additionally, you will find a set of documents explaining precisely what qualities might qualify under each of these concepts for each score, one through five. See the “Writing Assessment Scoring Guide” in the **Elementary Literacy Toolkit** (pp. 12-16). ✖

Tracking Student Progress—Using Running Records

Once you have diagnosed your students’ abilities on the front-end, a key to your success as a literacy teacher will be your system for tracking student progress. You may have a number of incoming sets of data about your students’ performance. As we discuss in *Instructional Planning & Delivery*, managing that information is well worth your time and effort as it brings clarity and focus to your instructional planning.

One particularly quick and manageable approach to obtaining and recording information about student

For reading levels, I assessed early and often using running records (along with a comprehension check). My students know where they are and where they want to be going, and they are able to use the leveling system in the classroom library to make sure that they are reading books at the correct level. I also have a system where my students recommend books to each other through a “5 star book” form, and then receive stickers when they have completed books. This also helps them to monitor their progress in reading and see their levels improve.

**Jessica Wells Cantiello, New York '03
PhD Candidate, The Graduate Center of the
City University of New York (CUNY)**

progress involves taking what are known as “running records.” A running record is a record of errors, or miscues, that readers make as they are reading a text. This simple assessment tool offers teachers a way to quickly and easily assess students’ reading behaviors “on the run.” Generally speaking, running records involve the teacher listening carefully to a child as the child reads a passage of text, and marking symbols for various types of errors. The teacher can then review those errors to find patterns that will inform instruction. For instance, a teacher might analyze notes from a running record and notice that a student consistently miscues while decoding the middle of a word. This teacher can surmise that the student has not grasped the multitude of vowel spelling patterns and as a result, decide to provide some individualized instruction in this important phonics skill.

Running records, which are useful for students of all grade levels, do not have to be complicated. In fact, you can implement a running record system with blank sheets of

paper kept in a notebook. Consider the following instructions for a running record system in which the teacher uses lined writing paper to record errors:

- Sit beside the student and explain that you want her to read the book independently.
- Read the title of the book to the child.
- Give the child the book and use a record form or a blank sheet of paper to mark her reading behavior and record miscues.
- When a child stops during reading, allow enough time for her to work on a problem before you supply the word. It is also important that you do not wait so long that she loses the meaning of the story while trying to solve the unknown word.
- Use a standardized system to record words read correctly, substitutions, omissions, and deletions.
- Take note of self-corrections. When a student corrects a miscue herself, it is an indication that she is monitoring her own comprehension.

- You may also wish to note hesitations, repetitions, and other reading behaviors which may not affect accuracy but may provide information about the strategies the reader is using.
- Divide the number of words read correctly by the total number of words and multiply by 100 to find percentage of accuracy.
- To determine oral reading rate, time the student while she is reading. Divide the total number of correct words by the total time to get the words correct per minute (WCPM).

Below is a passage that a third grade teacher used for a running record. Here is a list of reading mistakes (miscues) this teacher recorded and what symbols she used to do so:

Errors	If a student says a word other than the one printed, the teacher writes that in.
Attempted Decoding	If a student tries several times to say a word, the teacher writes the incorrect response(s).
Self-Correction	If a student corrects an error him- or her-self, the teacher writes "SC."
Word Skip	A skipped word is crossed out.
Word Insertions	A word that is not in the text is added.
Teacher Assistance	If a student is stuck and asks for or receives help, the teacher writes "TA" next to the word.
Repetition	Repetition is usually not scored as an error, but many teachers track it just to watch for patterns. Many teachers use an underline.

The teacher recorded miscues throughout the text on this sheet as the student was reading; then she tallied those miscues in the boxes below the passage afterwards.

From *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*,¹⁹ by Louis Sachar:

✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ **ter-bly** ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ >**she** ✓ ✓
 Mrs. Jewls had a terribly nice face. She stood at the bottom of Wayside school and looked up.

✓ ✓ **su-pos-ed** ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ **TA** ✓
 She was supposed to teach a class on the thirtieth story.

✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ **SC** ✓ ✓ **scarred** ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ -
 The children on the thirtieth story were scared. They had never told anybody what ~~had~~

✓ ✓ ✓ **SC** ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
 happened to Mrs. Gorf. They hadn't had a teacher for three days. They were afraid of what their new

✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ >**before** ✓ ✓ **ter-bly** ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
 teacher would be like. They had never had a nice teacher. They were terribly afraid of nice teachers.

✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ **wind-ing cracking** ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
 Mrs. Jewls walked up the winding, creaking staircase to the thirtieth story. She was also afraid.

✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ - ✓ ✓ ✓ **TA SC** ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
 She was afraid of the children. She had heard ~~that~~ they would be horribly cute children. She had never

TA ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ **hor-bly** ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
 taught cute children. She was horribly afraid of cute children.

¹⁹ Sachar, Louis. *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*. New York: Avon Books, 1978, pp. 15-16.

Literacy as a Big Goal

✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ **ter-bly** ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
 She opened the door to the classroom. She was terribly nice. The children could tell just by
 ✓ ✓ ✓
 looking at her.
 ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ **hor-bly** ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
 Mrs. Jewls looked at the children. They were horribly cute. In fact, they were much too cute to
 ✓ ✓
 be children.
 ✓ **do not** ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
 "I don't believe it," said Mrs. Jewls. "It's a room full of monkeys!"

Type of Miscue	Substitution	Assisted	Insertion	Omission	Repetition	Self-Correction
Number	10	3	2	2	0	4
Total	17					
WCPM	81					

Word Recognition Scoring Guide (for 100 word piece of text)	
Total Miscues	Level
0-1	Independent Level
2-4	Indep./ Instructional
5	Instructional Level
6-9	Instructional/Frustration
10+	Frustration Level

[Note you will need to choose 100 words of the text to use this table]

An error analysis allows you to see where a student's decoding and fluency breaks down – does she struggle with multi-syllable words? If so, does she simply articulate the initial sound and then substitute another word that starts with the same sound? By examining this third grader's reading (above), the teacher can see that his main struggle is decoding multi-syllable words, especially those that contain the schwa sound (pronounced /uh/) at syllable junctures (as in *horribly* and *terribly*).

Searching for the Independent Reading Level

Running records are one way to determine whether your students are reading materials that are in an appropriate range of difficulty for them. To do that, count the total number of miscues. Divide that number by the total number of words read: for example, 10 miscues in 200 words is a 5% miscue rate. Subtract that rate from 100% accuracy, and you have 95% accuracy, which means it is on the student's independent level.²⁰ If we apply this formula to the third grade student's reading of *Sideways Stories*, we find that he has read the passage with 91% accuracy, which makes the text at his instructional level—a bit too hard for him to read independently, but appropriate if he has teacher or parent support.

²⁰ Modified from Beers, Kylee. *When Kids Can't Read: What Teachers Can Do*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003, p. 211.

- **Independent Level.** If a text is on students' independent level of reading, they will find fewer than one in twenty words (5%) difficult to decode or understand the meaning of. To roughly determine if a text is at a students' independent level, some teachers use the "five finger rule," where the student is asked (and taught, so he can use this method to choose texts he reads on his own) to read an approximately 100-word passage and put up a finger every time he comes across a word he can't read. If he puts up fewer than five fingers, the text is at his independent level and he will be able to read it and comprehend it without assistance from the teacher; the process of doing so will also build his fluency, due to the repeated exposure to words he already knows.
- **Instructional Level.** When students recognize 90 - 95% of the words in a text (so 5 - 10 fingers go up) the text is at their instructional level. In that range, we know that students, with support from the teacher, will expand their vocabulary and will be able to comprehend the text. A text at students' instructional level is a perfect text to be read with teacher support and instruction in word recognition, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies.
- **Frustration Level.** If a student has difficulty with the pronunciation or meaning of more than two out of every twenty words in the text (so recognize fewer than 90% of the words), that student is reading at a "frustration level." This delineation and definition is important because we know that students who are constantly reading at their frustration level have significant trouble understanding the reading and usually lose motivation to continue reading. If students are experiencing this rate of error, the teacher probably needs to shift to a more manageable text.

Teachers should use their recognition of students' frustration, instructional, and independent reading levels to judge how much assistance they will need to provide for a chosen text, how to guide students to find independent reading material, and how to be sure that they are giving their students appropriately challenging reading materials.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have surveyed the general literacy standards for each grade level, Kindergarten through fifth. Internalizing your state's reading, writing, and oral communication standards will be critical to you as you set goals for what your students will be able to do at the end of their year in your classroom. We also explored a range of diagnostics and assessments that you can use to determine your students' current levels of literacy ability. By having a clear end goal (your students meeting or exceeding state standards) and a firm understanding of your students' starting points (information from diagnostics), you will be prepared to provide excellent literacy instruction, measure your students' progress, and lead them to make significant gains in their ability to read, write, and communicate.