Reading, Relationships, & Resources

A Road Map for Remediation

Part 4 Informal Assessment of Writing and Spelling Deficits

In my last blog, I wrote about how to informally assess a child with reading deficits. In the blog previous to that, I wrote about how to gather information on a child struggling with reading, writing, and spelling deficits. That process is extremely helpful in building a "big picture" view of a child's strengths, weaknesses, learning styles, and character. In addition it can also better inform a teacher, tutor, or parent about the most appropriate informal assessments to use to ascertain not only a particular child's reading deficits, but also their writing and spelling deficits. Today, I will be dealing with writing and spelling deficits and I will provide you with a list of the components of written language that need to be assessed, along with a link to a handout of Informal Writing and Spelling Assessment Resources that I use for my own assessments. For a full definition and to completely understand these components of written language I recommend the book, "Writing Assessment and Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities" as well as my second webinar. Later in this series of blogs I will explain how all this information can be brought together as a report, providing a road map for remediation for a child.

This [handout](#) of Informal Writing and Spelling Assessment Resources contains a list of assessments I have used in our practice. Any of these assessments can be substituted for ones not listed here, however, it is important to consider whether the substitution is still effectively assessing the area being tested. My [second webinar](#) includes forms for recording these test results.

Informal assessment of what a student can and cannot do is at the center of instructional planning. Assessing a students' writing helps you to pinpoint skills students have and those they need to learn; skills you need to focus on for a class, group, or individual. It helps you to set goals at a class or individual level, and track the progress of a student or students over time.

Students' writing is difficult to assess. You can measure the mechanics of writing, but anything beyond that can be subjective.

I will now discuss and define the five different types of informal writing and spelling assessments. The [handout](#) of Informal Writing and Spelling Assessment Resources lists the actual assessments I recommend under each of the following areas.

- Informal Observations
- Handwriting Assessment
- Unaided Writing Analysis
- Spelling Inventories
- Informal and Diagnostic Spelling Tests

Informal Observations

You can informally observe and interpret a child's orthographic knowledge when they are writing and reading. Observing a child's reading provides insights into their spelling. In reading, words can be recognized using multiple textual clues, so the ability to read words correctly lies a little ahead of spelling accuracy (Bear

and Templeton 2000 and 2011.[1]) Generally if a student can spell a word, they can read it, seldom does this happen the other way around. There isn't a 1-1 match between reading and spelling errors because, with the use of context, students can read more difficult words than they can spell.

Handwriting Assessment

To assess handwriting, Handwriting Without Tears provide a free Screener of Handwriting Proficiency for Grades K-5 and there is an associated free webinar, entitled *"Screening for Success: The Importance of Handwriting Assessments in Every K-5 Classroom,"* which will walk you through using the screener. The Screener of Handwriting Proficiency includes a free download for each grade level and allows you to create a report for each individual student. I have created and provided a handout entitled, *"Assessing Handwriting Automaticity/Fluency,"* which is available with my second webinar.

Unaided Writing Analysis

First, I shall define what is meant by an independent writing sample (unaided writing), by quoting from The Writing Revolution: A Guide to Advancing Thinking Through Writing in All Subjects and Grades by Judith Hochman and Natalie Wexler

"Assessment given at the beginning, middle and end of the year that is designed to provide an overall picture of a student's independent writing, measure their progress and highlight areas where they need more support."

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[1] Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction (6th Edition) (Words Their Way Series) 6th Edition

Now, I'd like to discuss why it is important to study the samples they provide. Kelli Sandman-Hurley discusses the value of writing samples in her book "*Dyslexia and Spelling, Making Sense of it All."* In Chapter 1, with the heading, "Show Me the Writing Sample," she says, "Early on in my teaching career I used to say, "Just show me the writing sample." I was not as knowledgeable about dyslexia and language as I am now, but instinctively, it seemed like the obvious place to go to find out what a student understands about how the English writing system works. To this day, I repeat the mantra, "You can find everything you need to know about the student's current understanding in their writing sample."

From here she goes on to discuss how standardized tests can provide information about general weaknesses and strengths and how they can make it possible to monitor progress, but they are really only giving you a view of that student on *that* day, as many different factors are at play which influence how a student performs. What a student understands about how language works will determine how they interact with it. She goes on to discuss a number of writing samples and what a student's miscues or mis-spelllings can tell you about their understanding, or lack of understanding, of the English writing system. She shows you how developing an understanding of these miscues and what they mean allows you to help a student improve not only their spelling, but also their reading.

In the webinar "How to Spot Dyslexia in a Writing Sample," Susan Barton explains that written expression is always one of the weakest skills for dyslexic students, so it is well worth studying their work in this area. You can also request the webinar slides and a writing sample checklist to go with this webinar directly from Susan Barton.

This kind of analysis can't give you a diagnosis of a learning disability, but an in-depth analysis of a writing sample can provide a lot of information for designing a program for a student, or students, and allow you to fulfill their needs. Independent, or unaided, writing samples, when scored, provide Curriculum Based Measurements (CBM) which help a teacher determine which students are learning what is being taught and which are falling behind. These informal measurements are easy and quick to administer, and you can design

your own. They can be given on multiple occasions without invalidating any formal tests, and they are more sensitive to small changes than norm-referenced or formal diagnostic tests.

As part of my [second webinar](#), I walk participants through how to administer and score an unaided writing sample. I discuss free-standing and visual prompts in order to provide a student with writing ideas. I have provided a link for some visual prompts I use regularly in the [handout](#)**.** My [second webinar](#) also includes a handout entitled "Instructions to Parents - How to Administer an Unaided Writing Sample." If a child is unable to do this activity, I will administer a Handwriting Without Tears Handwriting Screener instead. In addition to this I have provided a further handout entitled, "How to Score an Unaided Writing Sample." As part of this webinar, participants are also provided with forms to use when analyzing a writing sample for recording both quantitative data (which can be measured and allows children to be compared with their peers) and qualitative data, such as spelling errors, or miscues. This qualitative data allows us to see how well a student understands the English writing system.

In my [second webinar](#) in addition to walking participants through the process of gathering and assessing an unaided writing, I also discuss alternatives to the writing sample. I have listed these and provided links in the [handout](#)**.**

Spelling Inventories

It is important, when testing student's spellings, to go beyond simply marking them right or wrong. An assessment should evaluate the student's understanding of sounds and conventional spelling patterns. The kinds of words that students miss, and the types of errors they make, are important in evaluating their spelling achievement and their understanding of language structures. For example by reviewing a student's errors you may see they are confusing 'b' and 'd'. Spelling inventories allow you to assess a student's spelling in this way. Inventories are lists of words that represent a mix of spelling

features at increasing levels of difficulty. They are like spelling tests, but children shouldn't study these words in advance. I have provided further information about spelling inventories in the [handout](#)**.**

Informal and Diagnostic Spelling Tests

I have included several informal and diagnostic (normed) spelling tests in the [handout](#). My [second webinar](#) also comes with a Spelling Tests Results Form, where many of these results can be recorded.

Conclusion

Writing, more than other tasks, taxes a student's working memory and executive function. There is a limit to how much any of us can hold and manipulate in our working memories. If a student is still struggling with the mechanics of writing, such as handwriting, spelling, and usage, they won't have the space in working memory to think about the higher level aspects of writing: purpose, meaning, audience, word choice, and syntax. Their lower level skills will need to have reached a point where the mechanics are not absorbing most of their attention. Having gathered the information about a student's reading, writing, and spelling skills, and identified their struggles, you are ready to construct a remediation plan to help them. My next blog will introduce you to the first of four student case studies. Each case study illustrates one of the four possible outcomes of the Simple View of Reading Model. They are known as reading profiles and discussed in my [first blog](#) in this series. The case studies also demonstrate how I brought together the reading, writing, and spelling information about each of these students to create their personal "Road Map for Remediation."

My webinars on informal assessment of reading, writing, and spelling deficits are available from the Orton Gillingham Online Academy at the links below. These were written for teachers, tutors, and parents who wish to explore informal assessment of these skills in depth.

- [Informal Assessment of Reading Deficits](#)

- [Informal Assessment of Writing and Spelling Deficits](#)

All previous blogs written in this series entitled a Road Map for Remediation can be found [here](#).

Lorna Wooldridge is a dyslexia specialist tutor with over twenty-five years of experience and qualifications in the field of learning differences, from both the UK and USA. Lorna has a unique perspective on this condition as she has dyslexia, and her passion is to serve this community in any way she can. She can be contacted through her website [Wise Owl Services](#) or her [Facebook page](#). Here she provides numerous resources for parents, tutors and teachers working with children and adults with dyslexia.