

## Analyzing Student Writing to Inform Instruction

In the data-based individualization (DBI) framework, when a student demonstrates limited response to a validated intervention delivered with fidelity, educators use diagnostic data to determine how to intensify instruction. Analyzing student writing provides one source of informal diagnostic data to identify skill gaps and inform instructional adjustments. Writing skills analysis involves examining student writing to (a) identify common error patterns and (b) use that information to align instruction with the student's needs.

Effective writing requires skills across multiple domains, including

- transcription (handwriting or typing),
- spelling,
- sentence construction,
- grammar,
- planning,
- organization, and
- critical thinking.

The Levels of Language framework shown in **Exhibit 1** (Troia et al., 2019) illustrates how these skills interact across four levels: sub-word, word, sentence, and text. Educators can analyze student writing at each level to more precisely align instruction to student needs.



**Exhibit 1. Levels of Language Framework and Key Writing Competencies**

| Level of language | Key writing competencies                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sub-word-level    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Handwriting fluency and legibility</li> <li>▪ Typing fluency</li> </ul>                                                                                                      |
| Word-level        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Spelling patterns (i.e., phonological, orthographic, and morphological)</li> <li>▪ Capitalization</li> <li>▪ Diversity of word choice</li> </ul>                             |
| Sentence-level    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Punctuation</li> <li>▪ Grammar and syntax</li> <li>▪ Transition words and connectives</li> </ul>                                                                             |
| Text-level        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Idea development</li> <li>▪ Logical structure and paragraph use for different genres</li> <li>▪ Topic sentence and supporting details</li> <li>▪ On-topic writing</li> </ul> |

*Note.* Table adapted from Valentine and Truckenmiller (2025).

This resource describes how to analyze student writing samples to inform instructional changes within a student’s writing intervention. Although the resource addresses all levels of the framework, educators may choose to focus on one level at a time based on student needs (e.g., focusing on word-level skills when spelling is an identified goal).



## Step 1. Collect and score student writing samples.

To conduct a writing skills analysis, begin by collecting student writing samples. Curriculum-based measurement in written expression (CBM-WE) provides a structured way to generate consistent, comparable data. CBM-WE is a brief writing task in which students respond to a prompt within a set time. For the purpose of conducting error analysis, educators may develop their own CBM-WE prompts or use commercially available assessments. To administer CBM-WE, educators

- share a story starter or informational writing prompt;
- provide 1 minute of planning time; and
- ask students to write for 3–15 minutes, often with multiple students responding at the same time.

One method for scoring CBM-WE is Correct Minus Incorrect Word Sequences (CIWS). To calculate CIWS, educators count sequences of words written correctly and sequences that include errors (e.g., spelling, punctuation, or syntax), then subtract the number of incorrect sequences from the number of correct sequences to produce an overall score.<sup>1</sup> It is recommended that educators administer a set of three writing probes to establish a stable estimate of student performance (Valentine & Truckenmiller, 2025).

CIWS generates quantitative data that educators can use to analyze error patterns at the word and sentence levels to identify instructional adaptations. Educators may also use the total CIWS score to monitor the long-term progress of a student's writing performance (e.g., tracking progress toward individualized education program goals).

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on scoring CBM-WE using CIWS, see [Using CBM for Progress Monitoring in Written Expression and Spelling](#) (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2011).



## Step 2: Analyze sub-word-level patterns.

Sub-word-level skills, including handwriting and typing, allow students to efficiently translate their ideas into written text. When students experience slow or effortful transcription or produce illegible writing, these difficulties can limit their ability to express ideas. Using the writing samples and observations gathered during CBM-WE administration (Step 1), educators can examine sub-word-level performance to identify potential barriers to writing.

When analyzing sub-word-level patterns, educators should do the following:

- Observe rate and legibility during writing (e.g., speed of handwriting or typing, ease of letter production, pauses to find keys).
- Review the CBM-WE writing sample to evaluate overall legibility and ease of reading.

Educators may assess typing directly by having students complete a brief typing task and considering both speed and accuracy. For reference, one benchmark suggests that by the end of fifth grade, students should be able to type approximately 85 characters in 90 seconds (Truckenmiller et al., 2025).

If students demonstrate difficulty with handwriting or typing, provide explicit instruction and structured practice to build fluency and accuracy. Some students may continue to need handwriting and typing instruction beyond elementary school (Truckenmiller & Chandler, 2023). **Exhibit 2** includes examples of instructional adaptations and activities to address sub-word-level writing difficulties.



**Exhibit 2. Intervention for Sub-Word-Level Writing Difficulties**

| Sub-word-level pattern    | Possible intervention adaptation                                                                                               | Example activities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Illegible handwriting     | Handwriting steps and arrows as visual supports to help students build accuracy with letter formation.                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teacher demonstrates writing a letter using numbered handwriting steps and arrows.</li> <li>Student uses the same sequence to first trace, then practice writing the letter (Graham et al., 2018).</li> </ul>        |
| Slow handwriting          | Cover and copy: Use repeated opportunities when students write letters, with and without visual cues.                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teacher shows the letter, then covers the letter while student writes the letter from memory.</li> </ul>                                                                                                             |
| Slow or cumbersome typing | Explicit keyboarding instruction, including short, structured activities (10–15-minute sessions) to build keyboarding fluency. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kindergarten/First grade: Familiarize students with keyboard layout and how to find letters and numbers.</li> <li>Second grade and older: Introduce touch typing (e.g., home row, “F” and “J” key bumps).</li> </ul> |

**Step 3. Count and analyze word- and sentence-level errors.**

Word-level competencies include spelling, capitalization, and diversity of word choice. Using the CBM-WE writing sample scored with CIWS (Step 1), educators can count and analyze errors within the word and sentence levels. **Exhibit 3** provides an example of a scored CBM-WE writing sample, where correct sequences are marked (^) and incorrect sequences are marked (x). These markings indicate where errors result in an incorrect sequence and provide a starting point for analysis. For example, in the first line of **Exhibit 3**, the misspelled word “diffrently” results in two incorrect sequences, each marked by an x before and after the misspelled word.

After scoring the sample, educators count incorrect sequences and categorize them by type of error. In this step, focus on identifying and counting word-level errors (e.g., spelling, capitalization) while distinguishing them from sentence-level errors (e.g., punctuation, syntax).



**Exhibit 3. Example of Notated Student Writing Sample (Word- and Sentence-Level)**

^The ^farmer ^and ^Olivia ^feel Xdifferently Xwhen ^they ^work  
 ^toward Xthere Xgoals XXthe ^farmer ^feels ^happy ^and Xhopefull  
 Xeven ^when Xpepole Xtell ^him ^nothing ^will ^grow ^on ^his  
 ^farm^. Xhe ^keeps ^working ^and ^he ^says XX So ^you ^say X  
 and ^he ^keeps ^smiling ^while ^he ^waters ^his ^plants XXhe  
 Xbeleves Xhis ^hard ^work ^will ^pay ^off^. ^Even Xtho Xpeople  
 XtellsX him ^nothing ^will ^grow ^on ^his ^farm^.

^The ^second ^story ^was ^different XOlivía ^is ^a ^girl ^who  
 ^plays ^soccer^. Xshe ^feels Xfrustated Xwhen ^she Xtrys Xto ^score  
 ^a ^goal ^in XsocerX. ^She ^practices ^every ^day ^but ^she ^keeps  
 ^missing ^the ^net, ^so Xolivia Xgroans ^and Xworrys Xand ^even  
 ^wants ^to ^quit^. Xthe ^net^. Xshe ^thinks ^scoring ^a ^goal ^is  
 Xto Xhard XXshe ^only ^starts ^to ^feel ^better ^when ^her ^dad  
 Xencurages Xher ^to ^try ^again^.

Run-on sentence; phonemic, orthographic, and high-frequency spelling errors

Punctuation error

Capitalization error

Subject-verb agreement  
 Punctuation error

Capitalization error

Incomplete sentence: "the net"

High-frequency spelling error

CIWS score:  $106 - 40 = 66$



**Exhibit 4** shows the number and type of word- and sentence-level errors from the writing sample shown in **Exhibit 3**.

#### Exhibit 4. Number and Type of Word- and Sentence-Level Errors

| Level of language | Number and type of errors                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Word level        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 20 errors               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 12 spelling errors</li> <li>– 8 capitalization errors (7 beginning of sentence, 1 proper noun)</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
| Sentence level    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 8 errors               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 7 punctuation errors</li> <li>– 1 syntax error (subject-verb agreement)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>                         |

#### Analyze Word-Level Errors

These results show that word-level errors represent most errors in the student's writing. Within the word-level errors, both spelling and capitalization errors are present, suggesting that instruction should address each area.

#### Spelling

Spelling errors may be classified as phonemic, orthographic, morphological, or high-frequency word errors (Toste et al., 2025; Williams & Novelli, 2025). For more information, see [Error Analysis in Word Reading and Spelling](#). In the writing sample shown in Exhibit 3, the student made 12 spelling errors distributed across multiple error types. The spelling errors include

- phonemic errors (e.g., *diffrent*, and *frustated*);
- orthographic errors (e.g., *beleves*, *socer*, and *encurages*);
- morphemic errors (e.g., *worrys* and *trys*); and
- high-frequency word errors (e.g., *tho* for *though*, *there* for *their*, and *to* for *too*).



### Capitalization

The student's capitalization errors include frequently not capitalizing the first word of a sentence and one instance of not capitalizing a proper noun (*olivia*).

**Exhibit 5** provides possible intervention adaptations and example activities to address word-level error patterns. Providing explicit instruction in spelling patterns can improve writing quality and readability, as well as support reading outcomes (Graham & Santangelo, 2014; Hall et al., 2023).

#### Exhibit 5. Word-Level Intervention Adaptations and Example Activities

| Word-level pattern    | Possible intervention adaptation                                                                                                                 | Example activities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Spelling errors       | Provide explicit and systematic spelling instruction specific to the type of error (i.e., phonemic, orthographic, morphemic, or high-frequency). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>See Exhibit 7 in <a href="#">Error Analysis in Word Reading and Spelling</a>.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Capitalization errors | Provide explicit and systematic instruction in capitalization conventions.                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have students use a word bank to identify which nouns are proper nouns requiring capitalization and sort them by type (e.g., person, place, month).</li> <li>Have students use a self-monitoring routine to review writing for proper nouns and sentence-initial capitalization and correct errors.</li> </ul> |

### Analyze Sentence-Level Errors

Sentence-level competencies include correct use of punctuation, syntax, and sentence structure. In the writing sample in **Exhibit 3**, the student made eight sentence-level errors, including punctuation and syntax errors. Students often require explicit instruction in sentence construction (e.g., sentence combining) to develop sentences that are both grammatically correct and syntactically complex (Truckenmiller & Chandler, 2023).



### ***Punctuation***

- The student made seven punctuation errors, primarily related to missing periods, resulting in run-on sentences.
- Additional minor errors include omission of a comma and quotation marks.

### ***Grammar and Syntax***

- The student made one syntax error related to subject-verb agreement (“people tells”).
- The writing includes one incomplete sentence.

### ***Transition Words and Connectives***

- The student demonstrates limited use of transition words and connectives to clarify relationships between ideas.

**Exhibit 6** provides example intervention adaptations and example activities to address sentence-level error patterns.

#### **Exhibit 6. Sentence-Level Intervention Adaptations and Example Activities**

| Sentence-level pattern                         | Possible intervention adaptation                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Example activities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Punctuation errors                             | Provide explicit and systematic instruction in punctuation conventions.                                                                                                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Have students match punctuation marks to sentences.</li> <li>▪ Have students edit peer or sample writing (e.g., current or previous students’ work) to identify and correct punctuation and sentence-level errors.</li> </ul> |
| Grammar and syntax errors:<br>Run-on sentences | Provide explicit instruction in identifying and revising run-on sentences, including teaching students to express one main idea (or closely related ideas) per sentence and to use punctuation or conjunctions to separate ideas. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Model how to use slash marks during revision to show where one idea ends and another begins, then replace slashes with periods or conjunctions.</li> </ul>                                                                    |



| Sentence-level pattern                               | Possible intervention adaptation                                                                                                                             | Example activities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Grammar and syntax errors:<br>Subject-verb agreement | Provide explicit instruction in sentence structure, ensuring each sentence has a subject and verb and that they agree. Provide explicit feedback on grammar. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have students use a self-monitoring checklist to review subject-verb agreement (identify subject, verb, and check agreement).</li> <li>Use recast and expansion to model correct grammar:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Student</i>: "People tells him ..."</li> <li><i>Teacher (recast)</i>: "People tell him ..."</li> <li><i>Teacher (expansion)</i>: "People tell him that nothing will grow on his farm."</li> </ul> </li> </ul>                                                                                                                                             |
| Transition word and connective errors                | Provide explicit instruction in the use of high-utility transition words to convey relationships between ideas (e.g., cause/effect, examples, contrast).     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Model how to combine shorter sentences both with and without using connective or transition words (Graham et al., 2018).</li> <li>Teach and practice high-utility transition words to show relationships between ideas:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cause/effect (e.g., <i>because</i>, <i>therefore</i>)</li> <li>Examples (e.g., <i>for example</i>)</li> <li>Contrast (e.g., <i>however</i>)</li> </ul> </li> <li>Use digital writing tools or platforms to model sentence combining and provide immediate feedback on students' use of connectives and transitions.</li> </ul> |

## Step 4. Review writing quality at the text level.

Text-level competencies include idea development; logical structure and paragraph use; topic sentence and supporting details; and on-topic writing. When reviewing text-level patterns, use a rubric that is specific to the writing genre to assess key elements of that genre (e.g., use of supporting evidence for persuasive writing). Based on the rubric elements, annotate the writing sample to identify text-level writing patterns.

An example rubric educators may use to analyze writing samples is the TIDE rubric (Collins et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2023; Laud & Patel, 2023; Mason et al., 2012). TIDE is a framework that supports the organization and evaluation of informational writing.



If using the TIDE rubric, educators review student writing for the following elements:

- **Topic:** the introduction of the topic
- **Ideas:** important evidence linked to the topic
- **Details:** elaboration that explains or supports the ideas
- **Ending:** a conclusion that connects back to the topic

In addition, educators may consider students' use of academic language in writing (i.e., TIDE-L), including students' use of precise and content-specific language.

**Exhibit 7** provides an example of a text-level analysis of the writing sample shown in **Exhibit 3**, using the TIDE rubric.

#### **Exhibit 7. Example of Notated Writing Sample Passage (Text-Level)**

**Topic:** The farmer and Olivia feel differently when they work toward there goals **Idea 1:** the farmer feels happy and hopefull even when pepole tell him nothing will grow on his farm **Detail 1:** he keeps working and he says So you say and he keeps smiling while he waters his plants he beleves his hard work will pay off. **Detail 2:** Even tho people tells him nothing will grow on his farm.

The second story was diffrent, **Idea 2:** Olivia is a girl who plays soccer. she feels frustated when she trys to score a goal

Topic is clearly stated.

Idea 1 summarizes Passage 1.

Details 1 and 2 provide additional summarization.

Text lacks a detailed examination of Passage 1 about hard work paying off.

Idea 2 introduces Passage 2.



in soccer **Detail 1:** she practices every day but she keeps missing the net, so olivia groans and worrys and even wants to quit. the net. **Detail 2:** she thinks scoring a goal is to hard **Detail 3:** she only starts to feel better when her dad encourages her to try again.

Details 1 and 2 summarize Passage 2.

Detail 3 is a detailed examination that supports Idea 2.

There is no conclusion statement.

### Analyze Writing Sample Using Rubric and Teacher Notes

In the writing sample, the student states a topic that compares the two passages, indicating that the response addresses the prompt. The student also includes two ideas that summarize each passage. However, the writing provides limited detail to elaborate on these ideas. In the second paragraph, one detail directly supports the idea that Olivia feels better when her dad encourages her. Overall, the response primarily summarizes the two passages rather than providing detailed explanation that connects back to the topic and compares how the farmer and Olivia feel about their goals. The writing does not include a concluding statement.

**Exhibit 8** provides possible intervention adaptations and example activities to address text-level patterns.



## Exhibit 8. Text-Level Intervention Adaptations and Example Activities

| Text-level pattern                                                                                                                        | Possible intervention adaptation                                                    | Example activity                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lack of organization/<br>unsupported main ideas                                                                                           | Provide explicit instruction in the planning stage of the writing process.          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Model the PLAN strategy (Graham et al., 2016):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pay attention to the writing assignment by identifying what you are asked to write about and how you should develop your essay.</li> <li>List your main ideas after gathering and evaluating ideas.</li> <li>Add supporting ideas (e.g., details, examples, elaborations, evidence) to each main idea.</li> <li>Number the order in which you will present your ideas.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>                    |
| Lack of organization/<br>unsupported main ideas                                                                                           | Provide explicit instruction in using writing strategies for basic text structures. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduce one strategy for each genre and build complexity as students develop proficiency:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Persuasive writing: TREE (Topic sentence, Reasons—three or more, Ending, Examine)</li> <li>Informative writing: TIDE-L (Topic, Ideas, Details, Ending, Language)</li> <li>Narrative writing: C-SPACE (Characters, Setting, Problem, Actions, Climax, Ending)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>                                                                                 |
| Multiple grammar, mechanics, or spelling errors                                                                                           | Provide explicit instruction in self-regulation strategies.                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teach the COPS strategy (Graham et al., 2018):               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Did I Capitalize proper names and the first word in sentences?</li> <li>How is the Overall appearance of my paper?</li> <li>Did I use commas and end-of-sentence Punctuation?</li> <li>Did I Spell each word correctly?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Underdeveloped ideas/lack of cohesion (e.g., no clear introduction/opening statement, does not address prompt or audience, no conclusion) | Provide explicit instruction in using rubrics to support self-regulation.           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrate revising with a peer using a rubric:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share rubric with students and teach how to use the rubric with exemplary text.</li> <li>Have students self-evaluate using the rubric checklist (e.g., Did I include an introduction? Do all my reasons have at least one piece of textual evidence? Did I restate my position in the conclusion?).</li> <li>Include peer evaluations during the revision stage of the writing process.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |



## Conclusion

When a student has not made adequate progress in an intervention, a possible reason is that the instruction was not sufficiently aligned with the student's needs. Analyzing student writing samples across the levels of language—including sub-word, word, sentence, and text—provides information about specific skill patterns. Reviewing these patterns helps educators identify priority areas for instruction and select targeted adaptations to better meet the student's needs.

### Writing Instruction Resources

The following resources provide strategies to support writing instruction for students with intensive needs.

- [Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers](#) (What Works Clearinghouse Educator's Practice Guide)
- [Toolkit to Support Evidence-Based Writing Instruction in Grades 2–4](#) (Regional Education Laboratory toolkit)
- [Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively](#) (What Works Clearinghouse Educator's Practice Guide)
- [Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction](#) (CEEDAR Center Innovation Configuration)
- [Literacy LIFTER \(Letter Identification and Formation for Transcription and Early Reading\)](#) (Iowa Reading Research Center tool)
- [The Early Writing Project](#) (University of Minnesota; University of Missouri)
- [Writing Architect](#) (Michigan State University; Institute of Education Sciences)
- [Writing Better: What Teachers Can Do Today To Enhance Their Students' Writing](#) (NCII webinar)

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