



Structured activity 1

Free writing

A piece of writing by a learner can often tell you more than a diagnostic test about their development needs. Diagnostic tests often separate out skills such as punctuation or individual spellings. In order to get a more rounded picture of how someone actually writes, you need to look closely at a complete piece of writing.

Activity outline

- Decide on the topic(s).
- Introduce the activity to the learner.
- Look at the writing carefully, identifying strengths and weaknesses.
- Give feedback to the learner.
- Plan learning/set targets.

Choosing a topic

You need to choose a writing topic carefully. It should:

- enable the learner to show a range of writing skills
- be an easy subject to write about – and not involve too much time thinking about content
- avoid asking for personal information.

You may like to give learners a choice. Possible topics are:

- My journey to work/the training centre today
- My ideal car/house, etc.
- Instructions for a routine everyday or work task (N.B. avoid lists of points).

Analysing the writing

It may be helpful to use the literacy model in the core curriculum as a basis for analysis.

This identifies three dimensions to writing:

- **text focus:** logical sequencing, style, suitability for audience, overall meaning
- **sentence focus:** use of complete sentences, correct grammar, punctuation
- **word focus:** spelling, appropriate vocabulary.

Look for strengths first

Look at the writing and make a note of everything that is correct, however small. It's easy to focus on errors because these often stand out more clearly.

Checklist

Text focus

- ☐ Does the style fit the purpose?
- ☐ Is the language appropriate for the audience?
- ☐ Are the overall format and layout right?
- ☐ Are ideas in a logical sequence?
- ☐ Is the amount of detail or information about right?
- ☐ Are paragraphs used?
- ☐ Are paragraphs used correctly?

Sentence focus

- ☐ Is it written in complete sentences?
- ☐ Are any complex sentences used (i.e. are two ideas joined together with a conjunction such as 'and' or 'but')?
- ☐ Do sentences begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop?
- ☐ Are verbs in the correct tense?
- ☐ Is there subject-verb agreement?
- ☐ Are pronouns used correctly?

What punctuation is used:

- ☐ comma?
- ☐ apostrophe?
- ☐ question mark?
- ☐ exclamation mark?
- ☐ speech marks?
- ☐ Is punctuation used correctly?

Word focus

- ☐ Are simple words (e.g. phonetic ones such as can, end) spelt correctly?
- ☐ Are common words (e.g. are, go, about) spelt correctly?
- ☐ Are suffixes correct?
- ☐ Are double letters used correctly?
- ☐ Are vowel combinations correct?
- ☐ Are technical terms or unusual words included?
- ☐ Are technical terms/unusual words spelt correctly?
- ☐ Are any words of more than two syllables included? (Note how many.)
- ☐ Are words of more than two syllables spelt correctly?
- ☐ Is the writing legible?

Benefit to initial assessment

Although free writing is a relatively simple activity, it can help reveal lots of information about the specific strengths and weaknesses of a particular learner. It also suggests learning and practice that will help to plug the apparent skills gaps.