

# Writing Pathways

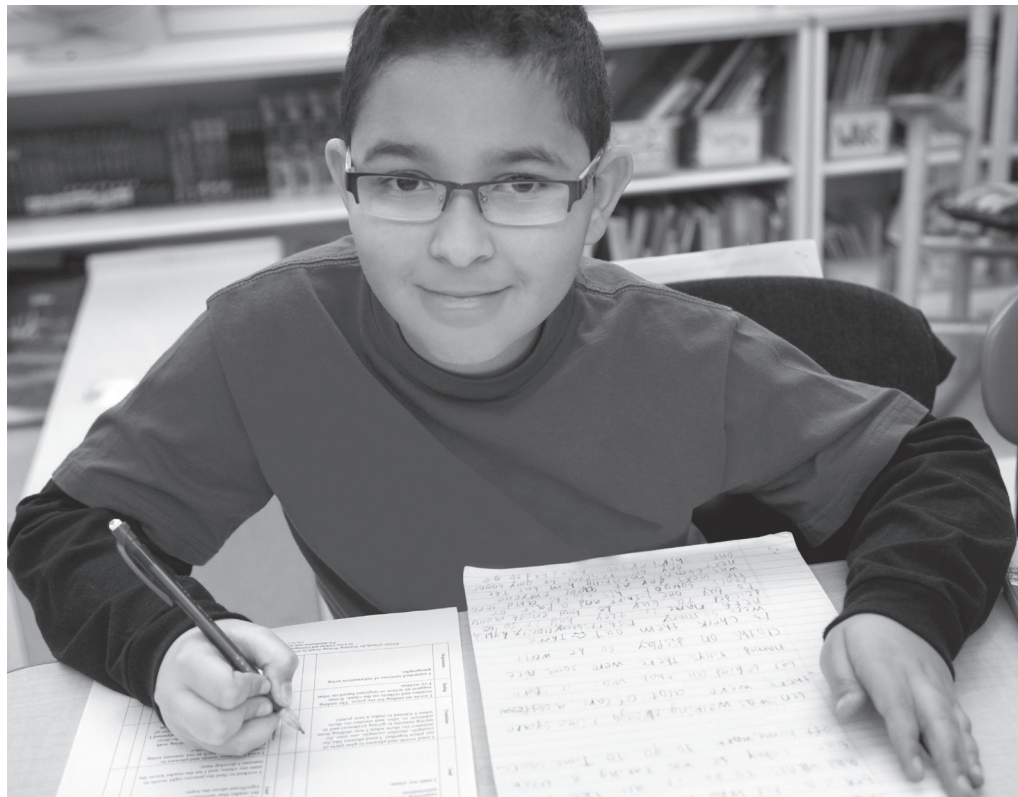
## *Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, Grades K–8*

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from The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project

*Photography by Peter Cunningham*

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# The First Step

## Conducting On-Demand Performance Assessments



THE ASSESSMENT TOOLS RELY on you regularly collecting on-demand writing that demonstrates what each child has learned to do quickly and absolutely independently. To have a record that shows how your students have improved as writers, you won't want to delay conducting your initial assessments. Start tomorrow, before you read beyond this chapter; there's not a lot you need to know to pull this off! It is important to students and their parents (and to you as well) to be able to look back on the journey traveled, saying, "Look at where you started and contrast that to where you are now!" The sooner you collect that initial assessment, the better. Ideally, you do this on Day One of the school year. Imagine the parent-teacher conference with, say, Robert's parents. You bring out Robert's first on-demand writing, say to his parent, "This is what your son's information writing looked like at the start of the year." Then you lay his most recent writing alongside the on-demand piece, saying, "Look! *This* is what he produced just the other day!"

You will rightly hesitate over the idea that on the first day of school, you'll say, "Welcome to my class. I want to start our year together by weighing and measuring you as a writer," but frankly, thousands of teachers are doing just that. At least you'll be in good company. Then too, remember that you control the tone of this work. Shift the way you introduce these assessments, so that you describe this as giving students a chance to "show off" all they know about writing.

The truth is that the earlier in the year you assess, the lower the starting level, and therefore, the greater the display of progress. There is no more potent way to encourage future growth than to show past growth. "Look at how dramatically you are improving. I can just *imagine* what your writing will be like by the end of the year. Amazing." Author and educator Peter Johnston reminds us in his book *Choice Words* (2004) that "once students have a sense that they are constantly learning, and are presented with evidence of that learning, teachers can ask not only about the details of their learning histories, but about the details of their futures, and the plans they have for managing those futures." By conducting an on-demand assessment as close to the start of the year as possible, and then gathering data in a similar way at other set intervals, you and your students will be able to see evidence of growth—and evidence of the effectiveness of your teaching. So don't tarry.

One more thing: the good news is that the assessment itself is not taxing to give, and at least for this first administration, at the start of the year, the results won't make you feel vulnerable. After all, the start-of-the-year on-demand pieces will reveal the *challenge* you have before you—that's all. Meanwhile, the benefit of conducting these initial assessments can be immediate. You can quickly ascertain whether your planned

curriculum is roughly appropriate for your students and make alterations as needed. The benefit for conducting these assessments is described in the upcoming chapter on norming and scoring.

## THE RATIONALE

It matters that students will be assessed on their abilities to write on-demand pieces. This reflects the fact that you are not aiming to produce great pieces of writing for bulletin boards and publication parties but are, instead, aiming to produce great writers. Your teaching on any one day is designed to lift the level of what writers do not just that day, when you are at their elbow, but also other days, when they are working on other pieces and you are not there. You are always teaching toward independence. And although you are also teaching writers to rehearse, draft, revise, and edit a piece across a sequence of days, you are also aiming to lift the level of the work that your students do with automaticity, quickly, in flash drafts.

It is significant that although this assessment toolkit is rooted in a writing process approach to writing, the assessment tools channel you to study your students' writing and your own teaching on the basis not of pieces of writing that are produced (with lots of input) across weeks of work, but on the basis of pieces that your students produce when they work on their own, on the spot. This respect for on-demand writing conveys a larger message. All the work on writing process is not just for students to learn that when they have a month to do so, they can produce an effective piece of writing. All the revision, all the conferences, all the study of mentor texts and the like need to culminate in students becoming more skilled at flash-draft writing, as well as at working on extended writing projects. In the end, writers need to be able to rehearse, draft, revise, and edit on the spot, quickly, under time pressure—and with independence.

When students are asked to produce their best work within an assigned time interval, working with absolutely no input from others, the resulting texts provide a clear demonstration of what students have learned to do independently. Whereas other peoples' hands are all over the published writing that students produce—as well they should be—an on-demand narrative, information, or argument piece written in class provides a snapshot of what the student can do on her own and within the limited window of time.

The emphasis on on-demand writing also says to parents, to other teachers, and to you as well, “If any of us coauthor a student's piece of writing, making it vastly better than anything the student could possibly do on his own, and if we do this by working so far outside the student's zone of proximal development that the student doesn't learn to do what we teach on his own, then even if this produces better writing, it is essentially for naught.” If a teacher or parent's involvement with a student's writing doesn't lead the student to write better another day, on another piece, that involvement doesn't add up to much.

### Teach the Writer, Not the Writing

One of the cardinal rules of any responsible approach to teaching writing is that instruction must teach students in ways that affect not just today, but every day. If you simply tell a writer what to do to improve his piece of writing, saying something like, “Your piece about the afternoon you spent walking in Hudson River Park would be stronger if you described the park and if you added a visual detail when you arrive at the park. Here,

when you stop to take a picture of the seagull that lands on the railing, show yourself making eye contact with the bird,” then the piece of writing gets better—but the student probably has learned nothing that he can transfer to another piece, another day.

A more effective way to help build your students’ skills is to focus on teaching transferable skills and strategies. This means that instead of telling the writer how to revise a story about the park, you teach a principle or a strategy to rely on often. For example, you might say, “I’m noticing that in this piece, although you name the setting—the park—you don’t *describe* that setting. In fact, often in your writing you develop characters and plot but forget about the role of setting. Your stories will be much richer if you remember to develop the setting. It is a good idea to scatter little descriptions of the setting throughout a piece—not just adding one big description at the beginning—and to show your main character interacting with the setting. In a personal narrative, that means you can find places in the story where you show yourself being aware of the setting. For example, when you say that you watched the seagull before taking a picture of it, you might show yourself taking in the setting, pointing out some of what you saw at that moment so that your reader can see it, too.”

The first approach—telling the student to add details into a specific paragraph—improves the *writing* more than the writer. That interaction is not apt to transfer to another day and another piece. The second approach aims to teach the *writer*; the distinction is essential to effective writing instruction.

Knowing that your writers will be assessed for what they do with independence, you and your colleagues will work with fervor to help students learn skills that transfer to any new work. When this assessment system is in place, it means that you and your colleagues (and your students’ parents as well) are less likely to obsess over helping a student make one particular piece of writing “perfect.” Instead, the emphasis shifts to helping students grow demonstrably as independent writers. These on-demand assessments become students’ chance to show off what they know how to do and your chance to measure the stickiness of your teaching.

## THE LOGISTICS

The schedule we suggest for these assessments is, first, at the start of the year and then again after every relevant unit of study. You and your colleagues can decide whether you want to assess in all three kinds of writing at the start of the year or to get just start-of-the-year data on the genre you teach first, postponing the preassessments in the other genres until you are on the brink of teaching that kind of writing.

Remember that whatever plan you devise, it is best if all the teachers across your school agree on the same plan. Some schools start the year assessing only the genre that will be taught first. (Of course, because your students’ work with any one type of writing will improve all their writing, the baseline for the other two kinds of writing will be at a higher level if you obtain that baseline later. If you teach two units of study on each genre (for instance, personal essay and literary essay) and assess at the end of each unit as well as at the end of the year, then you will give four on-demands on opinion/argument writing and a similar number of on-demands for narrative and information writing. That may seem like a lot of days devoted to assessment, but you can be sure that students work with extra fervor on these days, and what they are doing is actually not very different than what you ask them to do during any other day. Of course, one possible downside of so much assessment is that you are more overwhelmed with the pressure to score, but as you will see later in this discussion, you and your colleagues can

make the decision to use peer scoring (or self-scoring) instead of teacher scoring for some of the assessments.

Of course, not all writing assessments need be confined within the time allocated to language arts. The rubrics and checklists in this book can be adapted for use across the curriculum. Students will benefit enormously when they hear the same (or similar) writing criteria used for all of their writing, whether it is a science lab report or a reflection about characters in a novel.

It is important to keep in mind that the purpose of assessment is to support growth. This means that although these on-demand assessments will be somewhat formal and need to be administered with consistency, you and your colleagues can decide to vary the plan if doing so supports students' growth. Imagine that you and the teachers across your grade conduct an assessment of students' narrative writing on the very first day of school and their work is shockingly low (this happens, trust me). You and your colleagues might decide that the first on-demand may not have been a good reflection of what the students can actually do. Perhaps it shows summer rustiness. With this in mind, you and your colleagues might decide to give students a two-day immersion in narrative writing, one you plan together so that it includes showing examples of effective narrative writing, and then you might readminister the on-demand assessment. After all, why adapt the instruction you had planned based on an artificially low assessment of what students can do, if you can actually ramp up that level through a short, intensive review?

Alternatively, after scoring a set of persuasive letters, you might decide the class needs reminders of what they learned the previous year. You might say to the class, "I think you may be forgetting to do things you know how to do! I'm going to teach a one-day intensive course (we often refer to this as a boot camp), and then you will have a chance to do another on-demand assessment." You might even add a day for students to reflect on and revise their first on-demand pieces of writing before heading into writing a second round of them.

Any of these decisions will work within this system of assessment, provided that all teachers on a grade level (if not all teachers across the school or the district) conduct the assessment under similar conditions so that the assessment data can be compared. I do encourage you, however, to keep and to cherish that first bit of baseline data, even if this means photocopying the initial on-demands before allowing students to revise them. Just as a parent cherishes the souvenirs of a child's first days, first steps, first words, you and the students in your care will enjoy looking back to celebrate progress. Imagine the end of the year celebration when students display their start and end of the year work, announcing, "I used to be this kind of writer . . . but now . . ."

Many teachers find that it is powerful for students to keep their on-demands close at hand during the day-to-day writing workshop so they work with deliberateness to make sure their writing is improving. You might consider asking students to tape their first on-demand writing into their writer's notebooks or folders. As the unit progresses and students' writing grows exponentially, you might encourage them to flip between their original on-demand piece and their latest entry, admiring the progress they have made. This will also help ensure that the level of students' writing *does* grow. Given that

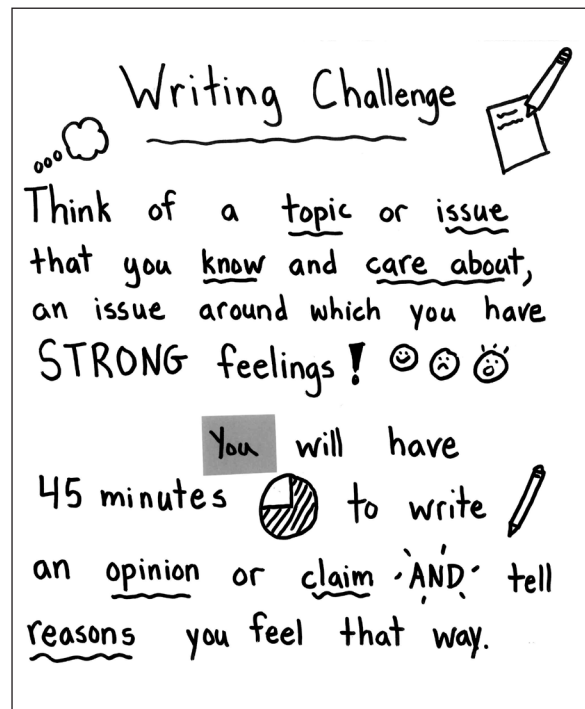


FIG. 2-1 To get her class ready for the next day's opinion on-demand assessment, Lisa wrote the prompt as a chart. The next day, she posted it in the classroom for students to use as a reminder as they wrote.



students tend to pour their energy into assessments, regarding the first on-demand as baseline can end up setting a high personal bar for writers. (See Figure 2–2.)

## HOW DO I GIVE THE ON-DEMAND PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT?

Ideally, all students across a class, school, grade level cluster, and even school district will be given the same prompt for each type of writing, and you and your colleagues will agree to offer no support to the writers as they compose on-demand writing. This way, the writing students produce shows what they are able to do independently in that particular kind of writing. All of the prompts are included in Part II of this book. Here, for example, is the prompt for a piece of argument writing to be used as a performance assessment:

“Think of a topic or issue that you know and care about, an issue around which you have strong feelings. Tomorrow, you will have forty-five minutes to write an opinion or argument text in which you will write your opinion or claim and tell reasons why you feel that way. When you do this, draw on everything you know about essays, persuasive letters, and reviews. If you want to find and use information from a book or another outside source, you may bring that with you tomorrow. Please keep in mind that you’ll have forty-five minutes to complete this, so you will need to plan, draft, revise, and edit in one sitting.”

To scaffold students for greater success, there are additional grade-specific instructions after this prompt. You will probably want to read these aloud and display them visually as a chart. We recommend the following starting with third grade:

“In your writing, make sure you:

- Write a beginning for your piece and give your opinion.
- Name reasons to show why you have that opinion.
- Give evidence (details, facts, examples) to prove your reasons.
- Use transition words to show how parts of your writing fit together.
- Write an ending for your piece.”

The prompts vary slightly depending on the genre that is being assessed and the prompts for grades K–2 differ from the prompts used for 3–8. In grades 3–8, the opinion/argument and information prompts require giving students one day’s notice. For argument writing, for example, you initiate the idea of the on-demand writing the day before the assessment actually occurs, saying, “Think of a topic or issue that you know a lot about or that you have strong feelings about. Tomorrow, you will have forty-five minutes to write an opinion or argument text. If you want to find and use information from a book or another outside source, you may bring that text with you tomorrow.”

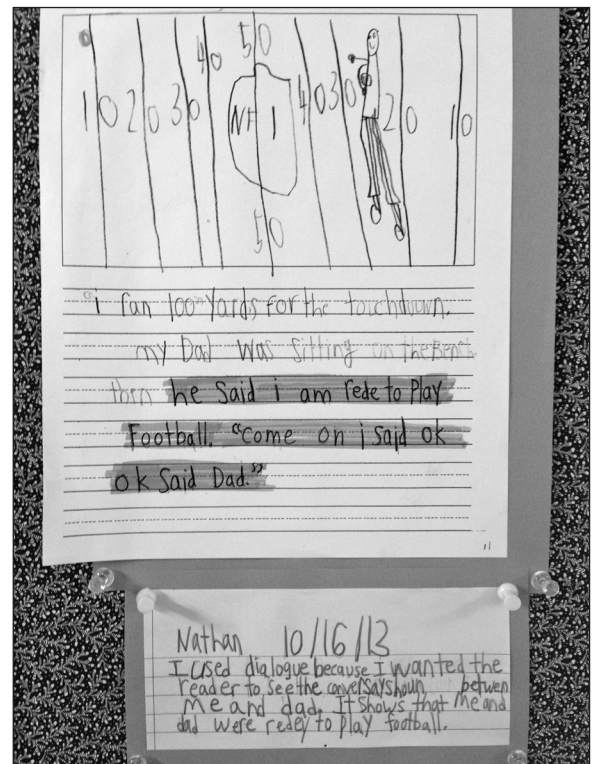


FIG. 2–2 When first-grader Nathan reread his work with a checklist at his side, he found evidence that he had used dialogue well.

This gives students the chance to bring an outside source with them to cite in their on-demand writing. In the elementary grades, few do, and you shouldn't expect otherwise. However, we felt it was important for a fourth grader, for example, to at least have the opportunity to do work that is at a middle school level (though, frankly, this is unlikely), and opinion and information texts at those levels will ideally cite a bit of outside evidence. The prior notice is not part of the K–2 prompts or of the narrative prompts.

For students in grades 6–8, it is important for them to incorporate outside sources into argument and information writing. It is for this reason that your prompt encourages students to bring the texts that make this sort of citation possible. By telling students about the upcoming assessment a day in advance, they can think of a possible topic and bring related texts to school with them on the day of the on-demand. If students do not have sources at home, you may schedule a visit to the school library or allow a few minutes on the computer before administering the on-demand assessment.

You may be tempted to alter the prompt, perhaps by making it more related to a topic the class has discussed or a text the class has read. We understand the temptation—we've done a lot of that ourselves, trust us!—and we caution you from experience that there is a big downside to altering the prompt: the work students produce can't be reliably compared. By keeping the prompt consistent, pieces can be compared to the work that students in earlier and later grades produced. Your students' work will not feel comparable to texts at other grade levels if the assessment context (your prompt or the conditions in which the assessment is done) changes. If your seventh-grade students' work is at, say, a fourth-grade level, you are going to want the students to see ways in which their work is comparable to the benchmark texts for that grade level, because this will shock your students into action, into getting better, quickly. For this reason, we encourage you to use the same prompt that has been used across all the grade levels. But, of course, the final decision is yours, and I do understand there are also reasons to tweak the assessment.

On the day of the assessment, after the forty-five minutes are over, collect the writing. The next chapter in this book describes the norming meeting that you will want to participate in with your colleagues before scoring the on-demands.

## QUESTIONS TEACHERS OFTEN ASK ABOUT CONDUCTING AN ON-DEMAND ASSESSMENT

**My students find it easier to get started when they are given topics. Shouldn't I give them one now?**

You may raise an eyebrow at the expectation that during these assessments, students will generate their own topics rather than writing on teacher-provided topics. Your hesitation may come because you think it is easier to compare and contrast lots of pieces of writing that are all written on the same topic, or it may come because you fret about whether your students will be successful at generating (and focusing) their own topics. You may worry that an inability to do so could derail the whole assessment. Again, your concerns are important ones, and we've certainly entertained them as well.

I think that once you have tried doing the assessments as we suggest, you'll be persuaded. The first time we asked students who had not participated in years of writing workshop instruction (where they are taught to generate focused topics) to write using the following prompt, we were a bit uncertain what it would yield.

“Think of a topic or issue that you know and care about, an issue around which you have strong feelings. Write an opinion or argument text in which you state your opinion or claim, and tell reasons why you feel that way.”

But what a haul we brought in! You should have seen us that first day, sorting through a huge pile of powerful pieces. One student’s text claimed that kids shouldn’t laugh at students with autism and went on to cite examples from that student’s experiences as a brother of an autistic child. Another piece was written by a Muslim student and focused on the importance of religious tolerance. Any number of students wrote with enormous intensity about animal rights, gender issues, fairness during gym—and time and again, we saw that the writer’s command of the topic and investment in the topic gave the writing special power. Younger students rose to the challenge as well, writing on topics such as why kids need more choice time in school and why Italian is the best cuisine.

We came to believe that when students can select topics, this actually *levels* the playing field. If students are all asked to write on an assigned topic—say, “Should kids wear uniforms?”—the chances are great that this topic will resound for only some writers and not for others. The assignment (and the opportunity) to write about an issue that you know about and feel strongly about allows each writer to write from an equal position of strength. And there are similar reasons for granting students topic choice in information and narrative writing.

Of course, the decision to allow students to select their own topic also reflects the belief that coming up with a topic, narrowing its scope, and expressing it clearly are skills that are integral to being an effective writer. Later in life, when kids are in college and beyond, the ability to tailor tasks, to find the part of a subject on which they can write well, will be crucial.

Having said this, we are aware that some teachers alter the prompts and turn them into more specific assignments. This kind of decision needs to be made collaboratively with colleagues across your grade level so that the conditions are kept constant. And, of course, the resulting texts will be a bit less comparable to those in this resource. But does this assessment still work if you decide to alter the prompt? The answer is yes.

### **The grades 3–8 prompt lightly suggests students *may* prepare at home. Should I make my students do so, because otherwise they won’t?**

If you worry that merely mentioning to students who are writing information or opinion/argument on-demands that they are welcome to bring relevant information to class will fly right over the students’ heads, know that you may be right. Few third-graders (even few fourth-graders) will bring materials to school, and even if they do, they are not apt to cite the source. Don’t worry about this. We find that by sixth grade, many students do bring in and cite source material (especially if they grow up using the checklists to self-assess and set goals). Students may simply forget, choose not to, or be unable to find material on their own. All of this will be worth noticing. As mentioned earlier, you might strategically schedule a trip to the library or computer lab on the day before the assessment, thereby leveling the playing field and ensuring that all students have had the opportunity to access materials. In the end, though, we encourage you to simply follow the instructions and not worry too much about what might happen. Students’ choices mean data-in-hand for you! The fact that they don’t cite sources early in the year makes it likely that their writing can improve later in the year, when hopefully they do.

## **What do I do as students write? If they have questions or need help, do I step in?**

I strongly encourage you to take a hands-off approach to students' work. If students need help choosing a topic, structuring a text, or spelling a word, simply record that bit of data for another day and meanwhile, say to them, "Just do the best you can and keep going." Resist the temptation to confer into what the students are doing or to coach them. If the students seem to have great difficulty and produce very little work or work that is far below grade level expectations, let that be the case. You need to know what they can do *without you*.

I also encourage you to take notes as students work, realizing you can learn a tremendous amount from this day. Plan to construct some small groups based on what you see during just this one window of time. For example, watch to notice the students who take a long time to come up with ideas, who don't find it easy to get started. On the other end of the spectrum, notice the students who don't seem to spend even an instant planning their writing. Then too, notice the students who write in a word-by-word fashion, pausing between words or between sentences. All of this will inform your teaching.

## **Will this writing show me all I need to know?**

You may question whether the on-demand assessment reveals enough—for it won't show you what students can do when given days or weeks to rehearse, draft, revise, and edit a piece. My answer is this: no, it does not reveal all you need to know, but it reveals a lot. It will not help you assess the amount of time a student is willing to invest in working on a piece of writing or the extent to which the student uses teacher and peer feedback, or the extent to which the student initiates writing in his or her own life. These are crucial aspects of students' writing that this assessment doesn't address, and there are other aspects as well. (The Writing Process Learning Progression, provided in Part II and online, provides much detail on these considerations.)

## **We are required to input all of our assessments into a computerized grading system. How do we do that with on-demand writing assessments?**

These assessments gain what can be a toxic level of power when these scores are input into computerized systems. So we caution you against broadcasting these in a public computerized grading system. If you need to register week-by-week grades for each student, we suggest you list indicators that you value—"volume of writing," "evidence that writer tries what has been taught," "willingness to engage in large-scale revisions," "improvement in conventions." Tell students that on any given week, you will assess their writing using one of these indicators as a lens—and tell them that they will not be told in advance which of these indicators you'll highlight in a given week. That way, you can place the scores from on-demand writing within a larger context that reflects your large and varied hopes for your students as writers.

Think about it this way: No music teacher enters the wrong notes that students sing into a computerized grading system and tells parents, "Sally only got 60% of the notes right and needs serious improvement!" Music teachers give feedback and focus on improvement. The important thing is that the on-demand assessments guide the teaching you do and help students work with increased clarity and drive.

## What is the post-assessment like, and when do I give it?

After you teach your first unit of study, you will issue the exact same invitation to your students, giving them the exact same prompt. They will once again devote forty-five minutes to an on-demand writing assessment. You and the students will then be in a position to look between the pre-assessment and this first post-assessment, noticing ways the writing has improved and ways it has not yet done so. Of course, growth in writing takes time, so you will see that certain components of a type of writing—say, the organization of their information writing—will have improved, but other components will not yet have improved. The good news is that as your teaching and your students' work shifts to focus on another type of writing, students can continue to tackle whatever needs are identified (and work in one type of writing strengthens skills broadly). Also, of course, you're likely to revisit each type of writing across the year.

No matter what your particular question may be, the deeper answer is this: You are a professional. This book is a resource only. Make the decisions that work for you and your community.

