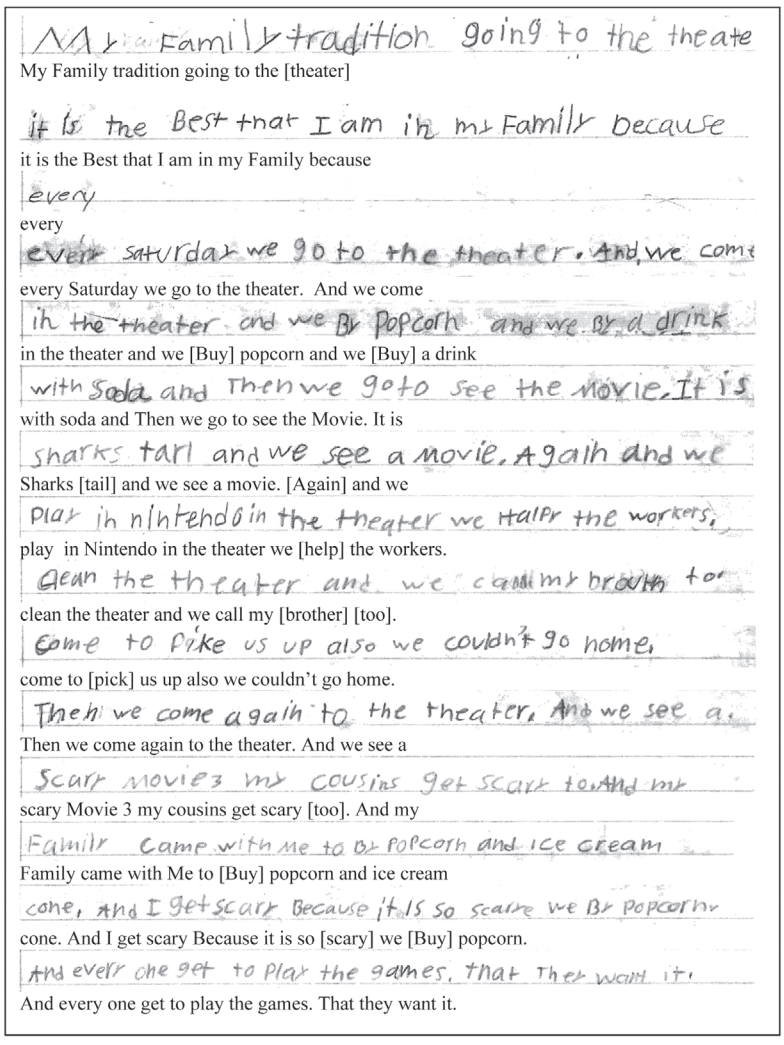
Lucy K. Spence

Discerning Writing Assessment: Insights into an Analytical Rubric

This article will help teachers weigh the strengths and weaknesses of rubrics as they develop their own professional knowledge and theories of learning for assessment.

Early in the school year, Dulce, a third grader in a Spanish-dominant school, wrote the personal narrative shown in Figure 1. Dulce's teacher Karla and her colleague Berta recorded their conversation while evaluating Dulce's narrative using the state-mandated analytical rubric. Karla and Berta's conversation reveals their thinking about the process and product of writing and how it is defined by the assessment tool. All names are pseudonyms.

Karla: *She (Dulce) worked very closely with a community, her writing community. I think that the most important thing is that she really was invested in the project. Although by looking at the paper you think that she is probably missing some ideas. But I think that her language kind of limits her.*


My Family tradition going to the theate

My Family tradition going to the [theater]

it is the Best that I am in my Family because

it is the Best that I am in my Family because

every

every

every Saturday we go to the theater. And we come

every Saturday we go to the theater. And we come

in the theater and we [Buy] popcorn and we [Buy] a drink

in the theater and we [Buy] popcorn and we [Buy] a drink

with soda and Then we go to see the Movie. It is

with soda and Then we go to see the Movie. It is

Sharks [tail] and we see a movie. [Again] and we

Sharks [tail] and we see a movie. [Again] and we

play in Nintendo in the theater we [help] the workers,

play in Nintendo in the theater we [help] the workers.

clean the theater and we call my [brother] [too].

clean the theater and we call my [brother] [too].

come to [pick] us up also we couldn't go home.

come to [pick] us up also we couldn't go home.

Then we come again to the theater. And we see a

Then we come again to the theater. And we see a

scary Movie 3 my cousins get scary [too]. And my

scary Movie 3 my cousins get scary [too]. And my

Family came with Me to [Buy] popcorn and ice cream

Family came with Me to [Buy] popcorn and ice cream

cone. And I get scary Because it is so [scary] we [Buy] popcorn.

cone. And I get scary Because it is so [scary] we [Buy] popcorn.

And every one get to play the games. That they want it.

And every one get to play the games. That they want it.

Figure 1. *Dulce's personal narrative in her handwriting with typed copy*

Berta: *I saw that. That is one thing I talked about when I was grading the paper. I thought she was a language learner. And I wanted to give her more credit, but not knowing the writer, sometimes you need to know the writer to give her credit for what she is capable of doing. But if you don't know the writer and you grade this paper, then you grade her as a normal student. You know, as anybody else would. And the reason I gave her a 3 was because I can understand what the writer is trying to say, but the paper may not hold the reader's attention all the way through. Okay, and I know there is a language, I don't want to say language barrier or deficiency. That she's a language learner.*

Despite their linguistic and cultural connection with Dulce, Karla and Berta ultimately deferred to the rubric rather than to their knowledge of Dulce to rate her writing. Although Karla discusses how Dulce worked with a community during the process of writing, and while she was aware of the many weeks of research, discussion, drafting, revising, and editing Dulce put into the project, the rubric does not include writing process or engagement, so Dulce's ability to work with her peers and work hard

was not taken into consideration. Berta agrees that she, too, thought of Dulce as an English learner (EL) and argues that because she did not know Dulce, she could not *"give her more credit."* Both teachers struggled with how to account for the student's language development; they seemed to want to take that into consideration and not score her paper as they would an English-dominant student.

Like many teachers, Karla and Berta were struggling to implement credible writing assessments within the sociocultural contexts of classrooms and student lives. Their conversation reveals how an assessment tool, in this case the analytical rubric, can frame how teachers perceive student writing. Analytical rubrics necessarily influence teachers. However, teachers may also privilege a rubric by entitling it over important contextual information during assessment. Here, the rubric both obscured and revealed information about the process/product of Dulce's writing. There is, however, an alternative reading of her writing—a way to explore it without the constraints of a rubric—that provides insights into Dulce as a person and as a writer.

Analytical rubrics necessarily influence teachers. However, teachers may also privilege a rubric by entitling it over important contextual information during assessment.

The Assessment Study: Context

The Analytical Rubric

In US schools, writing is often assessed with either holistic or analytical rubrics (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). Analytical rubrics separate and weight textual components. Each component has its own scoring scale with descriptive statements, sometimes extending to several pages of descriptors. Karla and Berta used the Six Traits analytical rubric. It was teacher-designed in Oregon and Montana in conjunction with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL). Detailed information on the context of the development of this assessment is not evident in peer-reviewed literature or provided by NWREL; however, it is now applied in widely differing geographical locations, grade levels, and genres (Bellamy, n.d). This rubric measures six writing traits: Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, and Conventions. Sometimes Presentation is assessed (Culham, 2003), but not in the rubric Karla and Berta used.

The Six Traits rubric is long and complicated. Six Traits consists of a 6×6 matrix containing 36 paired descriptors, each specified by trait and point value. Scoring for each of the traits is ranked from Low Performance (1 point) to Exceeds Expectations (6 points). An evaluator, usually but not necessarily the student's classroom teacher, assigns the paper a number for each of the traits, resulting in six scores per paper. A second evaluator independently assesses each paper and assigns scores for each trait. If the scores differ between evaluators, they must discuss their reasons for the assigned score and agree upon a final score. Six Traits was used throughout the school district in which this study took place and by the State Department of Education as a high-stakes writing assessment. Karla and Berta were trained in Six Traits through district staff development programs.

The intent of the Six Traits rubric as well as the intent of the institutions adopting it is clearly seen in this description from the Arizona Department of Education, *"This rubric was selected primarily because it is research-based, provides specific information about student performance, and is supported with classroom instructional activities. . . . It is not specific to a particular mode or genre of writing; it is designed to provide a consistent scoring method based on recognized characteristics of effective writing common to all genres"* (http://www.ade.state.az.us/standards/6traits). Although intended to be widely applicable and consistent, research indicates problems with reliability (Hollenbeck, Tindal, & Almond, 1999) and impact on writing achievement (Collopy, 2008). Additionally, the rubric fails to address sociocultural aspects of writing, such as content, context, culture, and linguistic diversity. Despite the best of intentions, its applicability to EL writing is questionable.

Sociocultural Influences on Learning to Write

Written language is a complex social tool (Vygotsky, 1934/1986) learned through a reflexive mode of interaction within socially situated contexts. This means that children's literacy development is influenced by a variety of contexts, including home, school, and community. Dulce's elementary school is located in an urban district

with a large immigrant and second-generation student population. Approximately 60% of students are English Learners and 98% of families speak Spanish in the home.

In Dulce's neighborhood, children come into contact with a variety of texts in both English and Spanish. They use these texts and languages for various purposes within their homes and communities. For instance, multilingual children know when to use Spanish and when to use English, when to use classroom talk and how to talk to friends on the playground. They recognize the kinds of language used by teachers, parents, and others in society. By the same token, teachers in their community use Spanish and English purposefully when speaking with students, parents, and other teachers. This mixture of languages and purposes for listening, speaking, reading, and writing are tailored to social situations, historical events, and cultural norms. Children draw upon these multiple voices as resources for learning and, reciprocally, multiple voices appear in their writing (Dyson, 2001; Smith & Edelsky, 2005, Fránquiz & de la Luz Reyes, 1998).

This authentic use of language varies from the contrived language expected in formal assessments. Students from diverse class, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds are expected to accommodate the discourse and socio-historical experience of teachers and authors of assessments (Walsh, 1991). Acquiring a second language is a complex process that unfolds over an extended period of time. In Collier's 1987 study, students who entered ESL programs at Dulce's age (7–8) required three to eight years to reach the 50th percentile on national norms in the subject areas tested. Imposing a standard designed for native English speakers with middle class understandings ignores the complex nature of language learning and may contradict the reality to which the child has been socialized, obscuring the subtleties of meaning within student writing. Analytic rubrics reward students whose language closely adheres to a language standard valued by rubric developers. Yet insistence upon the same writing norms for all students, regardless of language socialization, age, and written genre provides little flexibility for contextual considerations such as language and cultural background. This may contradict the instructional goals of their grade level, school, and community.

Imposing a standard designed for native English speakers . . . may contradict the reality to which the child has been socialized, obscuring the subtleties of meaning within student writing.

The Teachers and the School

Karla, in her fifth year of teaching, was Dulce's classroom teacher. Karla emigrated to the US as a child from El Salvador and, after high school, decided to pursue elementary school teaching. She earned a degree in Sociology with a minor in Education in a Pluralistic Society. After graduating, Karla pursued an alternative certification route where she learned about writing process and writing workshop. Upon taking her first teaching position, she began work on a master's degree in Education and earned her teaching certificate. Karla received partial training in Six Traits through the school district in her first year of teaching.

Karla's colleague, Berta, taught third grade in the room next to Karla and had been teaching for eight years. Berta was born in Mexico and moved to the United States when she was 17. She began her teaching career with a B.A. in Spanish and an emergency teaching certificate, but soon earned her permanent certificate and English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement. Later, Berta began teaching third grade in her current school.

Dulce was born in Mexico and had attended school in the US since kindergarten. Her family spoke mostly Spanish at home. Dulce spoke English conversationally and was in the emergent stages of learning English for academic purposes. She was the youngest of several children in her family. An outgoing child, Dulce frequently recounted to her teacher details about her life, both verbally and in writing. The school Dulce attended and where Karla and Berta taught was a "Reading First" school, and all teachers were required to teach a core reading curriculum for 90 minutes each morning. The school district implemented the Six Traits writing methodology before becoming a "Reading First" school and continued to require the use of the Six Traits assessment process in preparing for the state writing test.

At the time I conducted this study, I was teaching in the district, and I wanted to understand how assessment (such as Six Traits) informed teachers'

views of student writing. I am a native English speaker, a European American woman born in the state in which this study was conducted. I received training in Six Traits through the school district involved with this study.

The Assessment Study: Process

A Study of Teachers' Assessment Conversations

At the beginning of the study, I explained to Karla and Berta that I became interested in studying the assessment because of my own experiences using it as a teacher in their school district; I emphasized that I was not aligned with the assessment, nor was I critical of it. I subsequently visited Karla's classroom once each week from January through June and informally interviewed various students in the class about their writing. I took notes during my visits and interviewed Karla and Berta twice. This data added to my contextual understanding of the students and the classroom.

I gave Karla and Berta digital voice recorders and asked them to think aloud (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Prior, 2004) as they used the Six Traits rubric. My written and verbal instructions for the think-aloud were very simple. *"Talk through your thinking as you read the paper and give the Six Trait scores. Score as you normally do, taking the same amount of time that you normally do."* Karla and Berta assessed a personal narrative written in September and an essay begun in April. The teachers recorded their individual scoring and also recorded their joint discussions of scoring discrepancies.

I transcribed and analyzed the audio recordings, then coded the transcripts using discourse analysis to find what was revealed and obscured during the process of assessment. My analysis followed Tobin's suggestions for analysis (2000); I coded instances of Bakhtin's heteroglossia, dialogism, answerability, and carnival (1981, 1986). I also coded metaphors (Eubanks, 2004) and rhetorical influences (Eubanks, 2004, Tobin, 2000), including any central problem reflective of social tensions. I grouped the coded items into categories and referred to them as I continued analyzing each transcript. Using the developed categories, I then turned to field notes and interviews to locate connections across data sources. This form of analysis allowed for unique insights into this type of data.

Negotiating a Lengthy Rubric

Karla began the year by introducing her students to writers' notebooks, in which students wrote about topics of their choice. When Karla felt the students were accustomed to frequent writing, she helped them learn to write personal narratives. Karla used an example from the basal reading series that included a model narrative based on a child's family traditions. Instruction included extensive demonstrations, whole-class discussions, group work, and writing workshop. The students chose their topics, used graphic organizers to generate ideas, wrote multiple drafts, participated in revision and editing conferences with one another and the teacher, and shared their writing with audiences outside the classroom. Then Karen scored the children's narratives.

When Karla felt the students were accustomed to frequent writing, she helped them learn to write personal narratives.

Karla and Berta used the Six Traits rubric to score Dulce's narrative. The rubric consists of six pages of descriptors and uses a scoring method of negatively worded descriptors for the low scores (1–3), and mostly positively worded descriptors for the high scores (4–6). (See Appendix A for the full rubric.) The rubric for Organization illustrates the division between negative and positive wording.

1. There is no clear sense of a beginning or ending.
2. The beginning and ending are either missing or are poorly developed.
3. The beginning and ending are there, but one or both may be too short or too long.
4. The writing has a clear beginning and ending.
5. The writing has an inviting beginning and a satisfying ending.
6. The writing has a strong and inviting beginning and a satisfying ending.

These six descriptors are only a portion taken from 28 descriptive statements consistently divided between low and high. Karla and Berta scored Dulce's writing low by matching descriptors from the lower half of the rubric. Of 18 scores given by them, none were above a 3 (see Figure 2).

Teacher	Ideas & Content	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions
Karla	2	3	3	2	1	2
Berta	2	2	2	2	1	1
Karla & Berta	2	2	2	2	1	1

Figure 2. *Scores for Dulce's personal narrative given by two teachers*

The Authority of the Rubric and Its Consequences

The following excerpt from Karla's think-aloud during her assessment shows how she used descriptors from the lower half of the rubric to determine a score. I have emphasized (by *un*italicizing) the phrases from the six traits rubric that Karla refers to as she thought about assigning an Organization score.

Karla: *For Organization,* planning and using clear connections from beginning to end. *I'm stuck between giving Dulce a 3 and a 2. I would probably end up giving her a low 3, because she has* tried to present the ideas and details in a way that makes sense, but the paper is sometimes hard to follow. *She has* a beginning *of, never mind. I would, I changed my mind. She has a 2.* The writing lacks a clear structure, which makes it difficult to follow. *Um,* rereading may help but sometimes the piece . . . . *No, no, no, no. She's in between a 2 and a 3. So let's give her a 3, a low 3.*

Both teachers consistently quoted the rubric as they assessed. In this excerpt, Karla began by quoting the heading for Organization, *"Planning and using clear connections from beginning to end,"* then focused on the descriptors for the scores of 2 and 3. All the unitalicized phrases are quoted from the 2 and 3 score columns in the rubric, as Karla alternated between these scores throughout. Karla finally scored the paper as a 3, though she clearly struggled, saying, *". . . never mind . . . I would . . . I changed my mind."* This uncertainty continued when Berta and Karla discussed the score. Berta argued for a 2 and convinced Karla to lower the score.

Berta: *For Organization I also gave her a 2 because I don't think that this paper is very well organized. It stayed with the topic going to the movies, but at the same time, I didn't think it was a family tradition. How you spend your weekend, then it could be a 3. But if we stayed with the main topic of family traditions, being a language learner, I don't know if you explained what a family tradition is.*

Karla agreed with Berta rather than trust her knowledge of her classroom context, Dulce's cultural context, and her writing pedagogy. She could have argued she did not expect rigid adherence to a writing prompt, that going to the theatre each weekend *is* a tradition, and that Dulce used details to strengthen her message as defined in descriptors for scores 4–6. She did not and, consequently, all traits scored by both teachers ranged from 1–3. Neither teacher considered the descriptors for scores 4–6 in their recorded assessments.

During their assessments and discussions, Karla and Berta often stopped talking, flipped through the rubric, and quoted directly from it, illustrating the authoritative nature of the rubric.

During their assessments and discussions, Karla and Berta often stopped talking, flipped through the rubric, and quoted directly from it, illustrating the authoritative nature of the rubric. They did not discuss their own internalized beliefs and knowledge about writing and English learners. Instead, they quoted the rubric, treating it as authoritative discourse, which Bakhtin (1981) described as ". . . *indissolubly fused with its authority—with political power, an institution, a person—and it stands and falls together with that authority*" (p. 343). This seems to have happened because both Karla and Berta recognized the rubric as a mandated assessment used in high-stakes testing. In a subsequent interview, Karla described the rubric as a way to keep the teachers "in line" and as a powerful "enforcer."

Teachers in this school used the rubric to prepare for the state test in the spring every school year. The state test is based on the Six Traits rubric, and local newspapers publish the assessment results. Schools that perform poorly on this and other portions of the state test are subject to sanctions. This political

context enhanced the authority of the rubric. At the same time, the authority of the rubric reduced the authority of Berta and Karla's knowledge. Berta held an ESL (English as a Second Language) endorsement from the state, and Karla held a provisional ESL endorsement. These endorsements require between 15–30 hours of university course work for the teaching of English. For more than a decade, the district has encouraged teachers to obtain this endorsement and has provided pay stipends for it. In addition to this formalized knowledge, Karla and Berta know personally about English language acquisition because they are native Spanish speakers who are fluent in English. Yet, in their assessments, they placed more emphasis on the rubric than their own knowledge and experience with the writing of English learners. Consider Karla's thinking as she scored Dulce's paper for Conventions (rubric descriptors are emphasized).

The rubric's artificial separation of the traits takes the focus away from the meaning the child is communicating through personal experience brought to bear on a topic.

Karla: *Since she's Spanish speaking, she uses a lot of Spanish phonemic awareness. But her sight words are spelled properly, and there's really not that much spelling. So therefore, I'm going to give her a 2 because there are* frequent significant errors that make it difficult to read the paper.

Karla carefully analyzed Dulce's spelling and found she used Spanish phonemics to hypothesize English spellings. Ultimately, Karla found that, overall, there were minimal spelling errors. Yet Karla disregarded this knowledge in her scoring, instead focusing on conventions of writing not yet mastered. The negative wording, "*frequent, significant errors that make it difficult to read the paper*" prevailed over Karla's knowledge about Dulce's development as a speaker of English.

The Assessment Study: Analysis

Considering Content

When scoring Ideas and Content, Berta repeated the same critique from her previous Organization scoring, and Karla completely skipped it. Neither adequately assessed the content of Dulce's narrative.

Karla: *For Ideas, I didn't give her a score. I have to give her one, but I would probably give her a . . .*

Berta: *I gave her a 2. I didn't give her a 3 because I really didn't know if she knew what a family tradition was. Because I don't think that going to the movies is a family tradition.*

Content is essential to any piece of writing, and Dulce's topic of spending time with her family at the theatre is clearly appropriate for a personal narrative. One of the descriptors for a 6 in Ideas and Content states, "The writer has selected content and details that are well suited to purpose and audience." This descriptor was never mentioned by either teacher during scoring, and Dulce was given a score of 2 for that trait.

Content determines the theme of writing and impacts every writing trait. The way in which a writer organizes, assembles sentences, and chooses words is influenced by what he or she knows about the topic as well as experiences and feelings. Martin (1983) observed the importance of seeing children's writing as a holistic endeavor.

> *Genuine communication for children . . . is very often going to mean an inseparable blend of giving an account of the topic and expressing their feelings about it. If this is so, we should accept the mixture; if we discourage the personal element in it, we risk making writing an unwieldy and alien instrument instead of a natural extension of the children's own mental process.* (p. 157)

The rubric's artificial separation of the traits takes the focus away from the meaning the child is communicating through personal experience brought to bear on a topic. Focusing on one trait, such as Word Choice, sets up an artificial expectation, altering the intent of the writer. For instance, in scoring Word Choice, Karla discounted appropriate words Dulce used in writing about a trip to the theatre.

Karla: *For Word Choice, Dulce gets a 2. This [trait] assesses* choosing words carefully to create a picture in the reader's mind. *She gets a 2 because she* uses words that take away from the meaning and impact of the writing. *It seems that she really enjoys going to the movie theatre to help out her family, to help out the workers. She repeats a lot of words, with "then." She uses "buy" a lot and "scary." "Scary and scare." Then*

after awhile, after listening to all these "ands" and "thens" and "scary" and "come," it really takes away from her message. The words are not specific and colorful enough to really create a clear picture in my mind.

Karla stated that Dulce used words that conveyed her enjoyment, *"It seems that she really enjoys going to the movie theatre to help out her family, to help out the workers."* One way Dulce described this experience was through her choice of words. For instance, using various forms of "scare" was certainly appropriate to the mood of a story involving children watching scary movies in a theatre with little adult supervision. These words did not take away from her meaning, but contributed to the mood. Mood is one aspect of writing that is not mentioned in the Six Traits rubric, yet was important to Dulce's story.

Dulce's narrative may alternatively be assessed with attention to the content, openness to cultural and linguistic diversity, and attention to Dulce as a writer and a person with her own unique view.

Considering the Writer

As Dulce's classroom teacher, Karla knew about Dulce's home life and was involved in her writing process. Karla explains some of this context to Berta as they discuss their scores for Voice.

Karla: *I gave her a 3, and although she was not* always involved with the topic, *I* got hints of who she was behind the words.

Berta: *Or maybe because you know her.*

Karla: *Because I know her. And she doesn't come from the most affluent . . . She comes from a working class family. Mom works a lot, and she* [Dulce] *doesn't have a lot to do. She's working with her mom. That's what she's doing.*

Berta: *That's the feeling I got, they spend maybe the whole day at the movie theatre.*

Karla: *When I was reading it, because it's not my family tradition. I know what it's like because we used to go to the house that she* [Karla's mother] *used to clean.*

Karla describes Dulce as a girl from a working class family who accompanies her mother to her cleaning job at the theatre and watches movies while her mother works. Yet Berta insists *"because you know her"* is not a valid reason for giving Dulce a score of 3 for Voice. Karla persists in describing how she gets *"a hint of who she is behind the words"* by connecting with Dulce's experience. As a child, she also went to work cleaning houses with her mother. Karla implies that it is Dulce's voice that prompted her connection with the story through their shared experiences helping their mothers at work. In spite of this connection, Dulce received a final Voice score of 2.

I argue that Dulce's writing can be assessed very differently by the classroom teacher, or by another teacher who has some knowledge of the cultural context of the writer. For instance, when a writer can evoke a personal connection from a reader, such as Dulce's connection with Karla, that writer's voice is present in the work. Dulce's context, her language background, and her personal experience should be included in the assessment. The focus on traits and descriptors interferes with seeing the complexity of writing and the social context in which it is written and read. In contrast to the Six Traits assessment, Dulce's narrative may alternatively be assessed with attention to the content, openness to cultural and linguistic diversity, and attention to Dulce as a writer and a person with her own unique view of the world.

An Alternate Reading

An alternate reading (see Figure 3) of Dulce's story reveals several organizing principles in her narrative: use of an introduction, development of a theme, sequential events, a tension-filled climax, and a happy ending. Dulce uses a variety of organizational structures not mentioned in the rubric. She begins by introducing her topic and the theme, *"My family tradition going to the theatre is the best that I am in my family because every Saturday we go to the theatre."* Dulce draws attention to the fact that for her, going to the theatre is a tradition because it is repeated every week. These two organizing principles—introducing the topic and reinforcing the theme—are important aspects of Dulce's writing development and are highly valued in English narrative writing. The introduction is followed by developing the storyline in a linear fashion.

And we come in the theatre and we buy popcorn and we buy a drink with soda. And then we go see the movie. It is Shark Tale. *And we see a movie again. And we play Nintendo in the theatre. We help the workers to clean the theatre. And we call my brother to come pick us up.*

Analysis Method for Alternative Assessment	Examples from "My family tradition"
Voices of others	"Family traditions" "Help the workers clean"
Popular culture	"Shark Tales" "Nintendo"
Metaphor	"The best that I am"
Repetition	"We buy," "we call," "we see," "we go," "I get scary," "scary too," "so scary"
Opposites	"Come to pick us up"/ "couldn't go home" Play/work Scared/play
Theme	"My family came with me"
Mood	Enjoyment
Tension	"we called my brother to come to pick us up also we couldn't go home"
Time references	"Then we come again"
Organizational structures	Introduction, linear time frame, happy ending

Figure 3. *Alternate assessment with examples from Dulce's narrative*

After relating these events in sequential order, Dulce introduces tension into the story and creates a fearful mood through repetition of the word *scary.*

Also we couldn't go home. Then we come again to the theatre and we see a scary movie. My cousins get scared too. And my family came with me to buy popcorn and ice cream cone. And I get scared because it is so scary.

Children often use literary elements and devices such as mood, tension, repetition, and metaphor (Tobin, 2000; Eubanks, 2004) learned not from the classroom, but rather from reading, television, songs, and oral storytelling. An alternate assessment of Dulce's writing includes attention to literary elements and the voices of others that she brought into her writing. (For a detailed description of how this might be accomplished, see Spence, 2008.)

Dulce works her way through the high point of the story. The children cannot go home, so they stay to watch a scary movie that frightens them. The tension is relieved when, at the end, Dulce depicts the children having a good time: *"We buy popcorn and everyone gets to play the games that they want."* This is a happy ending to a culturally and socially significant story, emphasized through stating that going to the theatre is a tradition in Dulce's family. Based on this reading, I argue that assessment should focus on, rather than obscure, the genre, content, and cultural context of writing; in order to do so, the text must be read holistically.

A focus on linguistic context will also reveal insights into Dulce's writing. Dulce is becoming a writer as she writes a personal narrative within her social and cultural context; she does this by approximating aspects of conventional English writing that are meaningful to her. An alternate reading of her narrative acknowledges vocabulary development in English. For example, Dulce shows her knowledge of Spanish and English by using the word "theatre," a cognate of the Spanish word "teatro" (pronounced: teh-ah-tro), and also the synonym "movie." Rather than correcting mistakes, an alternate reading will highlight unusual sentences and phrases to better understand the writer. Dulce has appropriated correct English syntax (*"every Saturday we go to the theater"*) and experiments with partially correct syntax (*"And we see a scary Movies my cousins get scary to"*). By looking beyond Dulce's spelling and punctuation approximations, correct syntax is revealed, *"And we see a scary movie. My cousins get scared, too."* Read in this way, the voice of an excited child engaged in an entertaining day out with her family is evident. Her spelling and punctuation approximations are seen for what they are, rather than conflating them with other traits, such as Organization.

Dulce's language choices produce rhetorical effects. Her use of "we" in "we come, we play, we go, we call" presents a story about a family engaged in group activity. Here, Dulce's voice is the voice of her family. Within this family narrative, there is work and play: "We help the workers clean the theatre." and "Everyone gets to play the games." In this light, Dulce's voice is the voice of a playful, yet helpful and responsible child. She reveals complexity of emotion when she "gets scared because it is so scary." Dulce uses many phrases from popular culture—"theatre, soda, *Shark Tales,* Nintendo, scary movie, ice cream cone"—and writes with a contemporary voice. She says that going to the theatre "is the best [when] I am in my family." This phrase highlights the theme of family and is carried throughout the narrative and supported through a description of

how she works and plays in the midst of her family. An alternate reading acknowledges the influence of other voices, such as popular culture, other languages, school talk, and playground talk. These voices reveal much about the writer's process and intentions, and Dulce articulates her experience and personality through narrative with the voice of a playful, occasionally scared, responsible, contemporary, family-centered girl.

A Sociocultural Approach

I have shown how two teachers' thinking and conversations about the process and product of writing was constrained by the analytical rubric. In the larger study (Spence, 2006), two other teachers from distinctly different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds/districts also scored Dulce's writing similarly. In all cases, the rubric labeled Dulce as a deficient writer. Regardless of the teachers involved and regardless of their knowledge of student context, the assessments resulted in labeling ELs as deficient, precluding the usefulness of the rubric with English learners. Valdés and Figuroa (1994) assert English learners should not be assessed with instruments designed for other populations. The writing of English learners should be assessed in order to help them grow as writers, not to hold them to an accountability standard that was designed for native speakers when they are not yet ready. The rubric consistently highlighted the negative in Dulce's writing and obscured her as a developing English speaker and writer with unique strengths and needs.

The writing of English learners should be assessed in order to help them grow as writers, not to hold them to an accountability standard that was designed for native speakers when they are not yet ready.

Dulce's context as a writer, her language background, and her personal experience should be included as valid sources for a credible assessment. The best way to take these into account is through interaction and observation in the classroom. When student writing is sent to unknown evaluators, the context is lost. When the classroom teacher uses an assessment divorced from the realities of the writing process within the classroom, the context is lost. In the former case, understanding leading to more credible assessment is missing. In the latter, valuable information that could enrich instruction is discarded.

Writing necessarily involves individual writers, contexts, topics, genres, purposes, and many other features in combination to create unique works. The rubric used in this study offered only a limited perspective on writing. Teachers, administrators, and policy makers who implement assessments should allow for a variety of perspectives, rather than requiring a student's written work to be viewed only from the confines of assessment tools. The context of the writing, including the influence of cultural and linguistic diversity, should be highlighted; the multiplicity of forms of writing should be acknowledged; and the individuality of the writer should be honored. By assessing writing through multiple perspectives, teachers may access rich information leading to instruction that responds to the needs of each learner.

Implications for the Classroom

Classroom teachers must develop and trust their own professional knowledge and theories of learning for assessment. Student writing should be read holistically, focusing on the meaning the writer is communicating. If Berta had read the narrative to understand Dulce's meaning instead of expecting it to mirror her own family traditions, she might have seen Dulce's writing strengths. It is also important to keep a keen eye open for literary elements, such as the fearful mood at the theatre and the tension that transformed into a happy ending. Attention to these features of writing offers opportunities for instruction at the point of student strengths.

Teachers should become acquainted with elements of writing in various genres, students' home languages, and their lives outside of school. They should address the writing context during assessment, focusing on the writer rather than on the assessment tool. Decades of scholarship on the writing process provide the necessary information for appropriate assessment practices, including the following:

- Review the rubric.

  Before adopting a rubric for classroom use, review it in detail to determine what it will reveal and conceal in student writing.

- Consider the sociocultural context.

  When teachers know about their students' families and cultures, they are equipped to provide feedback to students and create meaningful and motivating curriculum.

- Consider the classroom context.

  Take into account the day-to-day work in the classroom. No work is ever truly finished, and all writers are in the process of becoming better. The process of writing within the classroom context is of primary importance.

- Be open to diverse modes of expression.

  Seek to understand the ways in which students use language to express their experiences and purposes. Be aware of diverse organizational structures, and show students what you notice in their writing. In this way, they can take pride in their own cultural literacies and learn valuable western European modes of discourse.

- Use assessment information in writing conferences.

  The focus of writing assessment must be to improve student writing and can be used to develop individual or whole-class curriculum. Through conferring with individual students, writing strengths can be highlighted and expanded. Students can also be shown patterns in their writing, leading to further discussion and improvement. Patterns across student writing can be highlighted in a whole-class lesson.

- Assess English learners appropriately.

  Any school district that uses an analytical rubric—and there are many—should consider the fact that these assessments are usually created for native English-speaking students. In school districts serving students who are English learners, assessments should be created specifically for them. Assessment should take into account students' home languages, how this knowledge is used as they write in English (Escamilla & Coady, 2001), and the time it takes to develop academic language. Students should not be penalized for their developing English, and assessment should not be used to compare them with fluent English-speaking students.

Author's Note:

Many thanks to Karen Smith, Carole Edelsky, and Sarah Hudelson for their encouragement and advice, and to Diane Stephens for providing feedback on drafts of this article.

References

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination* (M. Holquist, Ed.;.C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1986). *Speech genres & other late essays* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Eds.; V. W. McGee, Trans.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bellamy, P. (n.d.). *Research on writing with the 6+1 Traits.* Portland, OR: NWREL.

Collier, V. (1987). Age and rate of acquisition of second language for academic purposes. *TESOL Quarterly, 21,* 617–641.

Collopy, R. M. B. (2008). Professional development and student growth in writing. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 23,* 163–178.

Culham, R. (2003). *6+1 traits of writing: The complete guide grades 3 and up.* New York: Scholastic Professional Books.

Dyson, A. H. (2001). Where are the childhoods in childhood literacy? An exploration in outer (school) space. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 1,* 9–39.

Escamilla, K., & Coady, M. (2001). Assessing the writing of Spanish-speaking students: Issues and suggestions. In S. R. Hurley & J. V. Tinajero (Eds.), *Literacy assessment of second language learners* (pp. 43–63). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Eubanks, P. (2004). Poetics and narrativity: How texts tell stories. In C. Bazerman & P. Prior (Eds.), *What writing does and how it does it: An introduction to analyzing texts and textual practices* (pp. 33–56). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Ferris, D. R., & Hedgcock, J. S. (2005). *Teaching ESL composition: Purpose, process, and practice.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Flower, L., & Hayes, J. R. (1981). A cognitive process theory of writing. *College Composition and Communication, 32,* 365–387.

Fránquiz, M. E., & de la Luz Reyes, M. (1998). Creating inclusive learning communities through English language arts: From "Chanclas" to "Canicas." *Language Arts, 75,* 211–220.

Hollenbeck, K. L., Tindal, G., & Almond, P. (1999). Reliability and decision consistency: An analysis of writing mode at two times on a statewide test. *Educational Assessment, 6,* 23–40.

Martin, N. (1983). *Mostly about writing: Selected essays by Nancy Martin.* Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton Cook.

Prior, P. (2004). Tracing process: How texts come into being. In C. Bazerman & P. Prior (Eds.), *What writing does and how it does it: An introduction to analyzing texts and textual practices* (pp. 167–200). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Smith, K., & Edelsky, C. (2005). Different lenses for looking at the writing of English language learners. In J. Cohen, K. T. McAllister, J. MacSwan, & K. Rolstad (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium on Bilingualism* (pp. 2133–2142). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.

Spence, L. K. (2006). *Writing assessment: The rubric, generous reading, and English learners.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University, Tempe.

Spence, L. K. (2008). Generous reading: Discovering dialogic voices in writing. *English in Education, 42,* 253–268.

Tobin, J. (2000). *"Good guys don't wear hats": Children's talk about the media.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Valdés, G., & Figueroa, R. A. (1994). *Bilingualism and testing: A special case of bias.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1934/1986). *Thought and language.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Walsh, C. (1991). *Pedagogy and the struggle for voice: Issues of language, power, and schooling for Puerto Ricans.* New York: Bergin and Garvey.

Lucy K. Spence is an assistant professor in the College of Education at the University of South Carolina, Columbia.

APPENDIX A

IDEAS AND CONTENT
Explaining My Topic or Message

6

The writing is very clear, focused, and interesting. It holds the reader's attention all the way through.

- The writer has excellent control of the topic and has carefully selected details that clearly explain main ideas.
- The main idea(s) and supporting details stand out.
- The writer has selected content and details that are well-suited to purpose and audience.
- The writer makes connections and shares new understandings.

5

The writing is clear, focused, and interesting. It holds the reader's attention.

- The writer is in control of the topic and has carefully chosen details that clearly explain the main ideas.
- The reader can easily identify the main ideas and supporting details.
- The writer has matched the way he/she presents the topic with the purpose and audience.
- The writer makes connections and shares new understandings.

4

The writing is clear and sticks to the topic. It holds the reader's attention.

- The writer shows knowledge of the topic and has chosen details that help explain the main idea.
- The reader can identify the main ideas and supporting details.
- The reader can tell that the writer is aware of purpose and audience.
- The writer makes some connections, and new understandings may be present.

3

The reader can understand what the writer is trying to say, but the paper may not hold the reader's attention all the way through.

- The writer has some control of the topic; some ideas may be clear, while others may not seem to fit or are not clear.
- The writing may not have enough details; details are somewhat general or are not related to the ideas.
- The reader sees some ways that the writing matches purpose and audience, but it is not always clear.
- The writer makes obvious or predictable connections.

2

The writing is somewhat unclear and has few appropriate details.

- The writer has little control of the topic; ideas are not clear.
- The writing may have limited details, details that are repeated and/or details that are not related to the ideas.
- The reader is not sure of the purpose and main idea(s) in the writing but can make some assumptions.

1

The writing is unclear and seems to have no purpose.

- The writer's ideas are very limited or may go off in several directions.
- It is hard to tell what the writer really wanted to say.

ORGANIZATION
Planning and Using Clear Connections from Beginning to End

6

The writing shows careful and effective planning. The order of ideas moves the reader easily through the text.

- The writing has a strong and inviting beginning and a satisfying ending.
- The writing is easy to follow.
- Ideas, paragraphs, and sentences are smoothly and effectively tied together.
- Details are thoughtfully placed to strengthen the message.

5

The writing shows careful planning. The order of ideas helps the reader follow and understand the paper from beginning to end.

- The writing has an inviting beginning and a satisfying ending.
- The writing is easy to follow.
- Ideas, paragraphs, and sentences are smoothly tied together.
- Details fit and build on each other. Placement of details strengthens the message.

4

Ideas and details are presented in a way that makes sense. The paper is easy to follow.

- The writing has a clear beginning and ending.
- The reader can follow the order of the writing.
- Ideas, paragraphs, and sentences are tied together.
- Details fit where they are placed. Placement of details helps the reader understand the message.

3

The writer has tried to present ideas and details in a way that makes sense, but the paper may sometimes be hard to follow.

- The beginning and ending are there, but one or both may be too short or too long.
- The reader has difficulty following the order of the writing.
- Ideas, paragraphs, and sentences need to be tied together using connecting words, phrases, or ordering.
- Some details don't fit where they are placed. The reader would better understand the message if placement of details were different.

2

The writing lacks a clear structure, which makes it difficult to follow. Re-reading may help, but sometimes the piece is too short to show an orderly development.

- The beginning and ending are either missing or poorly developed.
- The reader frequently has difficulty following the order of the writing.
- Ideas, paragraphs, and sentences are either not tied together effectively or connecting words and phrases are overused.
- The reader is confused by details that don't fit where they are placed.

1

The writing is difficult to follow. The reader has to re-read often and may still be confused.

- There is no clear sense of a beginning or ending.
- Ideas and details are not tied together. They often seem out of order or as if they do not fit.

VOICE
Sounding Like a Real Person Coming through the Writing

6

The writer shows deep involvement with the topic. The writer skillfully matches the way the message sounds with the purpose and audience.

- The writer has an exceptional ability to speak to the reader.
- The writer communicates effectively according to purpose and audience (writing is either close or distant, as appropriate).
- The writing shows originality, liveliness, honesty, humor, suspense, and/or use of outside resources, as appropriate.

5

The writer shows strong involvement with the topic. The reader can picture the writer behind the words. The writer effectively matches the way the message sounds with the purpose and audience.

- It is clear the writer is speaking directly to the reader.
- The writing effectively matches the role of the writer; depending on the purpose and audience, the writing is either close or distant.
- The paper shows originality, liveliness, honesty, humor, suspense, and/or use of outside resources, as appropriate.

4

The writer is involved with the topic. The reader can tell who the writer is behind the words. The message sounds like it matches the purpose and the audience.

- The writer speaks to the reader in ways that connect the writer with the reader.
- The writing sounds like the role the writer is playing; it matches the purpose and audience.
- The paper shows some characteristics such as originality, liveliness, honesty, humor, suspense, and/or use of outside resources, but their use may not be appropriate.

3

The writer is not always very involved with the topic. The reader gets hints of who the writer is behind the words. The writer begins to match the way the message sounds with the purpose and the audience.

- The reader often feels out of touch with the topic and the writer.
- The writer's connection between how the message sounds and the purpose or audience is unclear (voice is too close or too distant to be effective).
- The writer gets the message across, but only in a routine sort of way.

2

The writer shows little involvement with the topic, purpose, or audience.

- The writing lacks a purpose and an interaction between writer and reader.
- The writing is likely to be overly informal and personal.
- The writing is largely flat, lifeless, and uninteresting.

1

The writer seems to make no effort to deal with the topic, purpose or audience in an interesting way.

- The writer does not seem to be writing to anyone in particular or to care whether the words or ideas will make sense to anyone else. Perhaps the writer misunderstood the assignment or may not have cared about saying anything serious, important, or interesting.
- The writing is flat, lifeless, and uninteresting.

WORD CHOICE
Choosing Words Carefully to Create a Picture in the Reader's Mind

6

The writer thoughtfully chooses words that make the message unusually clear and interesting.

- Words are accurate, strong, specific, and powerful; they create clear pictures in the reader's mind.
- Vocabulary is striking and varied but natural and not overdone.
- Both original expressions and everyday words are used successfully and in unusual ways.

5

The writer thoughtfully chooses words that make the message clear and interesting.

- Words are accurate and specific; they are used in places that help create a picture in the reader's mind.
- The writer uses a wide variety of words effectively (seems natural and not overdone).
- Experiments with challenging words are successful, or everyday words may be used in a new, interesting way.

4

The writer chooses words that help make the message clear.

- The words communicate the main idea, but may not paint a picture in the reader's mind.
- The writer uses a variety of words that seem to fit.
- The writing shows some experimentation with new words or everyday words being used in new ways.

3

The writer uses words that get the message across, but only in an ordinary way.

- The words communicate the main idea, but it seems that the writer settles for just any word or phrase rather than what might work best. Some words and/or expressions may be overused.
- The writer may attempt to use a variety of words, but some do not fit.
- The writing shows little experimentation with new words or everyday words being used in new ways.

2

The writer uses words that take away from the meaning and impact of the writing.

- The writer repeats words.
- Use of worn expressions begins to detract from the message.
- Words are not specific or colorful and do not create clear pictures for the reader.

1

The writer has a difficult time finding the right words.

- The writer may repeat words or phrases over and over again.
- No new words seem to be attempted.
- Words do not fit or seem confusing to the reader.
- Pictures are not clear in the reader's mind.

SENTENCE FLUENCY
Creating Sentences That Make Sense and Sound Like They Fit Together When Read Aloud

6

Sentences are carefully crafted; they flow smoothly and effectively with a natural rhythm.

- The writing is natural and easy to read aloud.
- Sentences have an extensive variety of lengths, beginnings, and patterns. They fit together effectively and add interest to the text.
- The writer uses both simple and complex sentences effectively and creatively.
- Fragments, if used at all, work well. Dialogue, if used, sounds natural and strengthens the writing.

5

Sentences are carefully crafted and flow smoothly with a natural rhythm from one to the next. The writing is easy to read aloud and understand.

- The writing sounds natural, is easy to read aloud, and is well paced (it's long when it should be long, or short and concise when it needs to be).
- Sentences have a variety of lengths, beginnings, and patterns, which fit effectively together.
- The writer uses simple and complex sentences effectively and creatively.
- Fragments, if used, work well. Dialogue, if used, sounds natural and strengthens the writing.

4

Sentences make sense and flow from one to the other. The writing is easy to read aloud.

- The writing sounds natural and is easy to read aloud.
- Sentences have a variety of lengths, beginnings, and patterns.
- The writer uses both simple and complex sentences with stronger control of simple sentences.
- Fragments, if used, work. Dialogue, if used, sounds natural most of the time.

3

Most sentences are understandable but not very smooth.

- The reader may have to re-read sometimes to follow the meaning. Some sentences drag on or are too choppy.
- Although some variety is found, the writer may start several sentences the same way, or several sentences may be the same length or pattern.
- Simple sentences work well, but the writer may have trouble with more complicated sentences.
- Fragments, if used, do not work well. Dialogue, if used, may not sound natural.

2

The sentences that are often choppy or rambling make much of the writing difficult to follow or read aloud.

- Much of the writing is difficult to follow or read aloud.
- Sentence patterns are the same and monotonous.
- The writing contains a significant number of awkward, choppy, or rambling sentences.

1

Sentences that are incomplete, rambling, or awkward make the writing hard to read and understand.

- The writer does not seem to understand how words and sentences fit together. Sentences are often confusing.
- Writing does not follow sentence patterns people use when they talk. It is hard to read aloud.
- The writer may use mostly short, choppy sentences or long, rambling sentences.

CONVENTIONS
Using Correct Spelling, Capitalization, Punctuation, Paragraphing, and Rules of English Language

6

Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, paragraphing, and usage are effective and make the writing easy to read and understand.

- Spelling is accurate even on more difficult words.
- Capitalization is consistently correct.
- Strong, effective use of punctuation makes the writing easy to read.
- Paragraphs are placed effectively and contribute to the organization of the paper.
- Proper use of the rules of English contributes to clarity and style.
- The writing shows strong skills in a wide range of conventions making editing largely unnecessary.

5

Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, paragraphing, and usage are correct and make the writing easy to read and understand.

- Spelling is accurate even on some difficult words.
- Capitals are used to begin all sentences, for proper names, and titles.
- Punctuation is correct and helps the reader understand each sentence.
- Paragraphs are placed correctly and effectively.
- Subjects and verbs go together, and the writing shows several examples of proper use of the rules of English.
- The writer shows strong and correct use of a variety of conventions with little need for editing.

4

Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, paragraphing, and usage are mostly correct. If there are a few errors, they don't make the paper difficult to read and understand.

- Spelling is accurate in almost all cases.
- Capitals are used to begin all sentences and for almost all proper names and titles.
- Ending punctuation is correct. Other punctuation helps the reader understand each sentence.
- Paragraphs are placed correctly.
- Subjects and verbs go together.
- The writer uses a variety of conventions correctly, but some editing is needed.

3

Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, paragraphing, and usage show some minor problems. The reader can follow what is being said, but there are enough mistakes that the reader really notices them and may have some difficulty following what the writer is saying.

- Spelling errors cause the reader to stop and re-read to figure out what is meant.
- Capitalization errors begin to be noticeable throughout the writing.
- Punctuation errors sometimes make the paper difficult to read.
- The writer uses paragraphs, but they may not be placed correctly each time.
- Subjects and verbs go together most of the time.
- The writer shows basic control of conventions, yet the variety is limited. There is significant need for editing.

2

There are frequent, significant errors that make it difficult to read the paper.

- Spelling errors frequently cause the reader to stop and re-read to figure out what is meant.
- Capitalization is not consistent or is often incorrect.
- Punctuation errors are frequent and make the paper difficult to read.
- Paragraphs often run together or are not placed correctly.
- Subjects and verbs go together some of the time.
- The writing shows little control of conventions, and there is extensive need for revisions and editing.

1

There are so many errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and usage that the reader has a very hard time getting through the paper. Some parts may be impossible to follow or understand.

- The writer shows little understanding of how or when to use capital letters or punctuation marks.
- There are many spelling errors and it may be hard to guess what words are meant.
- Subjects and verbs do not go together.
- Paragraphs are not used correctly, if at all.