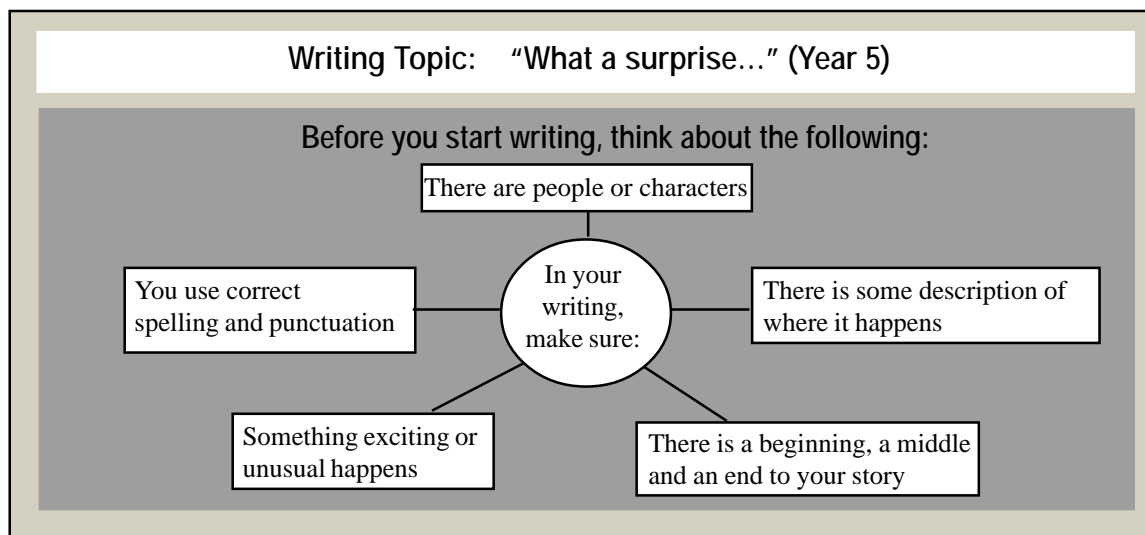


THE WRITING TEST

What is the writing test?

Standardised tests vary around the country, but the basics of the writing component tend to be built on certain assumptions. Let's start with an example:



What is the writing test assessing?

If we deconstruct such a writing task, certain assumptions become apparent:

1. The prompt or topic is deliberately 'open' – so that (within reason) no interpretation is out of bounds. Of course, the child's writing must at least *acknowledge* the 'topic' idea (a 'surprise' must feature somewhere in the manuscript). The key topic words will have countless associations, allowing children to choose their material from either personal experiences or fictional options. The test will always offer a 'universal' stimulus (eg here, any sight that could be called 'amazing'). Clearly, '**relevance**' (in the sense of demonstrably dealing with *that* topic), is expected. A child cannot write about anything at all (no matter how brilliantly). The unspoken reason is (as with most exams) to prevent prepared answers being used.
2. It is expected that children will have begun to master the underlying basics of a range of text types – narrative (in which characterisation and a shaped story structure are evident), recounts (use of description and detail, and should incorporate personal experience and description of feelings), etc – such that they can deal with a variety of topics and demonstrate competence in the manipulation of standard text-based content (ideas, events, issues, values, opinions). Understanding of **how texts work** is crucial to a coherent response. For instance, 'What a surprise...' might elicit a narrative or recount response – either based on the child's own experience, or on an imaginary surprise. Shaping such a response will demonstrate their knowledge of how stories and recounts actually work.
3. The test is about **written expression**. Even if not explicitly stated (as above), it is assumed. The underlying skills of spelling, punctuation and syntax are being tested, plus the child's ability to 'edit' (or self-correct). The drafting and revision process often used in standardised tests is a key part of this test of linguistic competence.

How might teachers prepare children for the writing test?

SAM does not include an interactive writing component. It cannot, because children's writing cannot be mechanically assessed.

However, there are things which definitely help teachers prepare children for the writing test. The good news is that they are exactly what you would be doing in normal classroom writing lessons anyway.

Here are some words of advice from a long-time standardised test assessor.

1. Encourage children to **write on the basis of their own experience**. This is not to preclude fiction. However, there is a danger, if children think the topic is inviting them to simply 'make it up'. In the stressful situation of a time test, they will be tempted to copy films or fantasy novels, because they cannot think up an original plot quickly. They can use life experiences and then transfer them into a more unusual/imaginary/complex setting or add details of what they would have liked to have happened rather than what actually did.
2. Make sure that children make **notes** or a rudimentary **plan** before starting. One of the greatest dangers of writing (particularly under time pressure) is incoherence – not knowing where the piece is going. Revise the concept of **paragraphing**. One continuous paragraph is a sign, for assessors, of lower competence.
3. Workshop the basics of different text types. Discuss the way narrative enhancements (like **description**, **dialogue** and the staging of '**dramatic incident**') can 'improve' a story. Source material can readily be found in novels and children's own writing. (We also recommend you look at the 'How to write a story' lesson in the Ziptales section 'Write Time'.)
4. Practise **self-correction** (after the act of writing). Leaving an otherwise strong piece of writing full of spelling errors or incomplete sentences is inviting a downgrading of the score, when a 'quick check' would save it.

What variations can be expected in answers, and how are they rated?

SAM cannot, as explained before, include an instrument for assessing children's writing directly. However, we offer sample answers (at both Years 3 and 5), with full annotations – as a guide to your work with children. They offer global remarks about writing skills or 'quality' issues, and recommend improvements in structure or style, as needed. These are guides only. In reality, standardised writing tests are norm referenced according to the expected range of competencies, and this *does* vary according to the testing authority.

As a very general guide, and in the spirit of identifying crucial elements (both in the 'text' competence and linguistic competence dimensions of writing tests), we offer sample answers, annotated to indicate what makes them 'Below average', 'Mid range' and 'Above average' at the two year levels. They are to be found as follows.

Sample Year 3 writing responses (downloadable link on SAM home page)

Sample Year 5 writing responses (downloadable link on SAM home page)

How is the writing test marked?

Again, there are variations around the country, but certain issues are predictable when the writing responses are assessed. The main concerns at primary level involve:

- the conception of ideas on an unknown topic within a short time frame
- the ability to frame these ideas in an ordered, logical sequence
- the ability to express these ideas in complete sentences
- the ability to spell and punctuate appropriately
- the fluency and expressiveness of language used
- the originality of the ideas in the essay (that is can they go further than borrowing ideas from films, TV, novels etc and draw upon own experiences and imagination).

Expected qualities (using a notional 10 point scale)

- 10-9** Demonstrates the ability to conceive original ideas (imaginative or based on life experience) and to develop these in a logical sequence, in a sustained, ordered piece of writing that engages the audience. Spelling and punctuation are flawless or very close to flawless. Syntax is sophisticated. The writing is very fluent. Expressive vocabulary greatly enhances the writing.
- 8** Demonstrates the ability to conceive generally original ideas (as above) and to develop these in a mostly logical sequence in a sustained and ordered piece of writing, that is somewhat engaging. Spelling and punctuation will be accurate, but may show occasional flaws. Syntax will be generally accurate, and the piece fluent. Vocabulary will be advanced but not necessarily highly expressive.
- 7-6** Demonstrates some ability to conceive original ideas, but may draw upon secondary sources such as films or novels. Conveys these in a generally sustained and ordered sequence. Spelling, punctuation and syntax will be generally accurate, but may show lapses. Vocabulary will be generally suitable but may not be particularly well-chosen.
- 5** Demonstrates some ability to conceive ideas, though many may be derived from other sources. Can convey these in an ordered sequence, generally using adequate spelling, punctuation, syntax and vocabulary.
- 4-3** Demonstrates a somewhat limited ability to conceive ideas and expresses these in a simple, but not well-ordered sequence. Spelling, punctuation and syntax are somewhat below the level expected at the time of year and year level and vocabulary is restricted.
- 2-1** Demonstrates a very limited ability to conceive ideas and is generally unable to express them in an ordered sequence. Major flaws in some or all of spelling, punctuation and syntax will be evident and the writing will be well below the level expected at this time and year level.
(In Australia wide tests a small number of students would be at this level.)
- 0** Demonstrates very little or no ability to conceive or order ideas or to express them. (Very few students would ever score this grade.)