

The Lost Tools of Writing Assessment

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Grading a child's assignments from *The Lost Tools of Writing* requires a proper understanding of evaluation and assessment. Parents need to understand—and effectively communicate to their children—the expectations of each assignment. Consideration has to be made for whether the assignment is to be assessed quantitatively or qualitatively, that is, with numbers or feedback.

As a homeschooling father myself, I have often reverted to what I know as a result of my own educational background. That reversion has led me to err in some of the ways I've attempted to educate and even evaluate my own children. Are we raising our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord if we are using a system of assessment that promotes an unnecessary level of competition between classmates and results in either pride or dejection? When we assess our children, are we actually assessing them according to the reality of the expectations we have communicated to them?

If we are going to assess our children with the goal of correcting and edifying them, we must assess them well. We must communicate our expectations well and stand by them. We must assess them quantitatively when appropriate, and we must assess them qualitatively when appropriate.

Quantitative Assessment

The Lost Tools of Writing (LTW) assigns three types of exercises: 1) ANI charts, as part of Invention, 2) outlines, as part of Arrangement, and 3) essays, as part of Elocution. Depending on which type of exercise is assigned and the expectations laid out for that exercise, we will have to determine which category of assessment we will apply. This is the mode of assessment we are familiar with from the Institute for Excellence in Writing (IEW). With IEW, parents assess their child's writing with a checklist that confirms whether the child had included the requisite number of items: *-ly* words, sentence openers, etc.

In LTW, when a student is assigned an ANI chart as an exercise of Invention, the child will have clear expectations placed upon him. Your child will need to know (and this will depend on which lesson he is on) how many items must be in each category of the list: affirmative, negative, and inter-

esting. If the assignment requires ten items per column, then that is how we assess the chart. *The Lost Tools of Writing* is not expecting the child to make judgments on the quality of the item at this point; without that as an expectation, we cannot and should not assess it. Thus, when we assess the ANI chart, we assess only whether they met the quantitative requirements of the assignment. If they needed ten items per column and only attained nine per column, then they score 27 out of 30. If they attain twelve, ten, and nine, they score 29 out of 30. They do not get extra points for exceeding the ten so as to make up for the lack of ten in another column. This is a strictly quantitative assessment; therefore, a numerical grade communicates to the child exactly what they did well and exactly what they need to improve.

Mixed Assessment

In assigning an outline as an Arrangement exercise, the child will also have clear expectations placed upon him. Depending on which lesson your child is on, certain bullet points will be required while others will not. Your child should be assessed according to whether he filled in each of the bullet points as required. This aspect of the assessment will be a strictly quantitative assessment. Your child, however, will also need to complete the bullet points in a particular order and in some cases may need to complete the bullet points with or without complete sentences. This aspect of the assessment will need to be a qualitative assessment. You will need to determine if the outline points are in the correct order and if they are in phrases or sentences where required. The assessment should be given in the form of written or oral feedback. The outline will be either acceptable or unacceptable. If unacceptable, your child should be told exactly—with concrete terms and specific examples—how to fix it and then made to resubmit the corrected outline.

Qualitative Assessment

In assigning an essay as an Elocution exercise, the child will again need to have clear expectations placed upon him.

EXPOSITION

Depending on which lesson your child is on, the essay may require different wording or rhetorical devices.

Your child should be assessed according to whether he met the clearly laid out expectations. Did he have an introduction, enumeration, three points, and a conclusion? Did he include any of the learned and assigned rhetorical devices? Since these are the only expectations clearly set forth, we should not be assessing our children on whether they wrote as well as we would have liked; we must remain faithful to the expectations we have set. As we assess the essay, we make note of whether the expectations were met or not. We provide a qualitative assessment to our children, again, in the form of oral or written feedback. We tell our children exactly—with concrete terms and specific examples—how to fix the essay and then make them resubmit the corrected essay. This feedback (and this also true of the outline feedback) may include positive feedback specifically identifying what they did well. It is not as helpful to say, “Good job,” as it is to say, “Good introduction,” which is not as helpful as it is to say, “The quotation you used in your exordium was gripping.” The negative assessment and feedback needs to be objective, as it is not helpful to say, “Work on your organization,” when you could say, “You put your conclusion after the introduction instead of after your three proofs.”

Assigning Grades

Giving your child numerical or letter grades is one of the necessary evils of education. At some point, your child will likely need a transcript of some sort. That transcript, by definition, will require numerical or letter grades. Scoring in said manner has the negative effect of causing our children to compare themselves to one another (a thought-provoking verse along these lines is 2 Corinthians 10:12) rather than to themselves over the course of their education career.

As we consider quantitative assessment, we are in easy territory for assigning numerical grades. It is when we enter the territory of qualitative assessment that assigning numerical or letter grades becomes more difficult. Consider

first that the only aspect of qualitative assessment that is necessarily helpful for your child is the concrete, specific feedback he receives. Letter grades may be helpful if your child strives for excellence for the sake of the grade—some do, some don’t—but they aren’t necessarily helpful. This may result in you assigning letter grades without telling them what those letter grades are—that’s okay. When you do assign them letter grades, don’t do so in a way that unjustly assesses and grades them compared to peers or some arbitrary feeling about how you think children in other educational systems would have done. Assess your children according to your realistic and clear expectations for them. Assess them according to how they have done and how they have improved.

This probably doesn’t make your life any easier when it comes to putting an A or B on the transcript. It doesn’t necessarily make mine any easier. It should, however, make your life easier in assessing individual assignments and students and doing so in a way that both corrects and edifies them. And, after all, that is ultimately what we want to do for our children: build them up for their Lord and God.

Assessors

Thus far we have considered assessment from the perspective of you, the parent, assessing your child. In reality, we live in a world that is constantly assessing us and being assessed by us. We cannot wake up each morning, open our eyes, and see the light of day coming in through the window without assessing our observations and determining that we have indeed awoken post-sunrise. We may not assess this consciously, but we are assessing it. Likewise, your child cannot leave the house without being assessed by others for his dress, appearance, mannerisms, etc. With this in mind, we need to do assessment in a way that teaches our children how to assess well and how to receive assessment well.

One of the ways we can teach them to assess well is to have them practice self-assessment. After your child has submitted a paper or given a speech, have him tell you what he did well and what he did poorly. He needs to be specific, as above, and he needs to be serious. (This works especially well in front of his peers, in community.)

Another way to teach them to assess well is to practice assessing their peers. When a peer has presented something to their community, let one peer assess what that child did well and another assess what that child can improve on. The two peers get to practice assessing, and if everyone presents, everyone should have an opportunity to be assessed as well as to assess positively and negatively. The child who presented also gets the opportunity to practice receiving assessment. He learns how to accept a compliment and a criticism. When I practice this peer assessment in community, I do not let the student being assessed argue with his peers. He must simply receive and thank them for their assessments.

Finally, the child is assessed by you, the parent. This is mentor assessment. Either mom, dad, pastor, grandparent,

director, or some other mentor assesses his work. He should receive assessment from someone he respects. These three assessments, from self, peers, and mentors, give the child the most well-rounded and thorough feedback they could get. They can compare and assess the assessments and apply them in order to learn from them best. This provides feedback that actually helps.

One final thought with regard to feedback that actually helps: When we praise our children (and by “we” I mean when peers or parents or mentors assess any other person), we must be careful to praise what they are actually responsible for. When a child practices a virtue well, we praise the child. When a child possesses a gift, we praise God. Praise your child for his hard work and diligence. Praise God for gifting your child with being smart.

How to Assess Writing in Challenge A

INVENTION: ANI Chart

- Director evaluates quantity of ideas—copiousness

ARRANGEMENT: Outline

Director looks for:

- Required new arrangement element included in the outline
- Review elements included
- No complete sentences, except in thesis

Note: Director points student to outline templates in *The Lost Tools of Writing Student Workbook* for specific requirements.

ELOCUTION: Essay

Director looks for:

- Required new elocution element included in the essay and identified with underlining or bold text
- Review elocution elements included and identified with underlining or bold text

Note: Director points student to checklists in *The Lost Tools of Writing Student Workbook* for specific requirements.