High-Quality Formative Writing Assessment

for Middle School Students in Tier 2 Literacy Interventions

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Abstract

Increased expectations for writing performance have created a need for formative writing assessments that will help middle school teachers better understand adolescents' grade-appropriate writing skills and monitor the progress of students with or at risk for writing disabilities. In this practice piece, we first explain research-based recommendations for high-quality writing prompts that are interesting to students, provide clear directions, and ensure accessibility and fairness. Then, we use lessons learned from working with adolescents in Tier 2 literacy intervention classes to demonstrate how teachers can apply the recommendations to identify or develop prompts that will encourage students to write responses. In addition, we explain how analytic rubrics may be used to evaluate responses as a means of informing instruction and further refining the prompts.

Keywords: Formative writing assessment, high-quality writing prompts, analytic rubric, middle school, literacy intervention

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Standardized writing assessments have become an established facet of today's educational system (Olinghouse & Colwell, 2013). After repeated calls for greater attention to writing in the literacy curriculum to better prepare adolescents for their future educational and occupational endeavors (Graham & Perin, 2007), states have been adopting more rigorous writing standards as well as accountability assessments in recent years (Shanahan, 2015). Rather than the formulaic five-paragraph essay that would have been considered proficient a couple decades ago, current standards require middle school students to demonstrate expressive writing that is complex in both content and structure (Campbell & Latimer, 2012). Thus, there is a need for formative writing assessments to help teachers identify and plan Tier 2 interventions for students at risk of not meeting the more rigorous on-grade-level expectations.

Characteristics of Students With or at Risk for Writing Disabilities

All Tier 1 students need effective instruction to develop grade-appropriate writing skills (Graham et al., 2020). However, compared to their more abled peers, students with or at risk for writing disabilities exhibit greater challenges with various aspects of writing, such as planning and organizing, word choice, basic sentence construction, grammar, handwriting, reviewing and revising, motivation to write, and expressive quality (Graham et al., 2017). Thus, supplemental interventions are important to ensure these students will be successful with the writing they are required to do in their core academic courses (Gillespie & Graham, 2014).

We distinguish Tier 2 from Tier 3 interventions based on the degree of writing difficulty exhibited by students in the middle grades. For example, we would consider a Tier 3 intervention to be for adolescents who are still working on basic sentence construction or who have a

handwriting disability (Smith et al., 2021). By contrast, the Tier 2 intervention of interest to the work presented here would be more appropriate for students who need targeted instruction in the features of paragraph and multi-paragraph writing that are common parts of content-area learning (e.g., Wissinger & De La Paz, 2020). This includes planning and organizing, word choice, reviewing and revising, motivation to write, and expressive quality.

The seventh graders in the Tier 2 intervention that informed our work were not meeting proficiency standards on the English language arts assessment in their state, 50% of which was determined by the writing portion of the test. About half the students were of color, one third were multilingual, roughly half were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and about 20% had been identified for special education services. The intervention classes were in addition to the core English language arts classes students were already taking and occurred in two different school years as we developed and then improved the writing prompts and rubrics used for periodic formative assessment. The assessments were administered during the intervention class to help guide the selection of the targeted lessons the students received.

Formatively Assessing Students' Written Expression Abilities

Formative writing assessments, or ongoing evaluations of student writing performance conducted during the learning process, help determine students' progress toward grade-level proficiency. That is, periodically testing students' writing skills affords educators the opportunity to judge the efficacy of their instruction, modify the practices and activities if necessary, and provide feedback to students about their writing skills (Graham et al., 2011).

One approach to formatively assessing students' progress toward grade-level standards is having students produce responses to writing prompts that are similar to those on state assessments in format, administration, and scoring (e.g., Smarter Balanced, 2021). Such an

approach measures the discourse-level writing skills of interest to our work. Previous research has established that adolescents' writing ability is composed of sentence- and discourse-level skills (Rodgers et al., 2020). For example, students in Tier 3 intervention who are working primarily on handwriting, capitalization, basic punctuation, and transcription might be formatively assessed using curriculum-based measures of sentence-level writing (McMaster & Campbell, 2008). Although these are important precursor skills, state assessments hold students in the middle grades and above accountable for extended responses. Such writing requires the discourse-level skills of connecting sentences into a coherent discourse about a topic by drawing upon students' knowledge as they plan and organize their response (Abbott et al., 2010).

Furthermore, state writing assessments may task students with composing extended responses in different genres – such as narrative, expository, informational, analytic, persuasive, or argumentative – that reflect a range of writing purposes and products. The prompts presenting the writing task may include one or more short passages to supply background information (e.g., Pearson Education, n.d.b), and students' responses subsequently are evaluated with a rubric that is aligned with targeted writing standards at the tested grade level (e.g., Tennessee Department of Education [TDOE], n.d.).

In our work on this approach to formative writing assessment, the rubric scores of teachers and researchers have demonstrated similar relationships to state assessment scores in Grades 3–11 (Reed & Mercer, in press). Other research similarly has explored the dimensions of teachers' rubric scores for narrative, expository, and persuasive writing samples of students in Grades 1–12 and the potential for using the formative assessment scores to inform writing interventions (Karasinski, 2022). Because these types of writing require more time and longer compositions than measures of sentence-level skills, adolescents who are reluctant writers or

those with or at risk for writing disabilities may not put forth their best effort (Troia et al., 2012).

This ultimately would leave teachers with less information about their students' skills and

progress, potentially limiting their ability to plan targeted interventions in discourse-level skills.

Adolescents' Motivation to Write

Many reluctant writers experience writing apprehension. This reluctance can occur when

a student has a writing disability, does not know how to begin writing, gets interrupted during the

writing process, has a negative attitude towards a writing project's value, or feels anxiety or

stress that would impede their ability to formulate a response (Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2015;

Graham et al., 2017). Motivating students to write can hinge on whether they find the writing

tasks assigned to them interesting or valuable to their performance (Wright et al., 2020). For

example, writing tasks that have real-world applicability or relevance to students' lives are

considered more authentic (Bruning & Horn, 2000). When students, including those with or at

risk for writing disabilities, can see a task's real-world applicability, they are more likely to write

and, in turn, become stronger writers (Cho, 2019; Olinghouse et al., 2012; Santangelo, 2014).

Thus, formative writing assessments should be as relevant to students as the resulting data are to

their teachers.

Purpose of the Present Work

Because middle school teachers tend not to assess students' writing abilities regularly

(Graham et al., 2014), our aim was to help educators and their students with or at risk for writing

disabilities find greater value in formative writing assessments. Drawing on our studies and the

research of others, in the following section we present criteria for selecting or developing writing

prompts for classroom use. This will include the characteristics of writing prompts and passages

that are more likely to motivate Tier 2 intervention students to write. In addition, we offer

guidance on the use of rubrics for determining students' progress toward grade-level proficiency and for making improvements to the formative assessments.

Criteria for High-Quality Writing Prompts

In developing the formative assessments for our work, we adhered to research-based criteria for high-quality writing prompts (Miller & Crocker, 1990; White, 2019). The following recommendations may also be used by teachers to select or develop prompts for classroom use.

Recommendation 1: Interesting and Relevant Prompts

To start, prompts should be interesting and relatable, and present students with a real-world problem to solve or an intriguing idea to think about and explore. Topics that are relevant to learners' personal lives (e.g., personal growth, human relationships, and life challenges) have been found to be more interesting and motivating to adults than remote and abstract topics, like global issues and current affairs (Poupore, 2014). Similarly, researchers suggest that prompts with real-world relevance are more motivational for school-age students, including those with or at risk for writing disabilities (Olinghouse et al., 2012; Santangelo, 2014). Further, if the formative assessments are timed, it is important that the topic be familiar to students, particularly those with or at risk for writing disabilities (Crawford et al., 2004) because familiarity can reduce the amount of time and energy students spend on formulating ideas, leaving more time and cognitive resources for them to plan their response, elaborate on ideas, and improve the sophistication of the language they use (Cho, 2019).

Recommendation 2: Prompts With Clear Expectations

Another criterion for high-quality prompts is that they make clear exactly what students are expected to do (Miller & Crocker, 1990; White, 2019). The need for clarity applies to the task (e.g., address both sides of the issue, give examples), genre (e.g., to explain, describe,

persuade), and format (e.g., speech, letter, story). In addition, students may be encouraged to write purposefully if they have a specific audience (e.g., your family, teacher, classmates), and they likely will adapt their writing to suit that audience (Cho & Choi, 2018; Olinghouse et al., 2012). For additional guidance, a prompt also can specify the tone (e.g., "… write in a tone that would be appropriate for an academic essay"). Providing the context and other parameters for the response can help students overcome mental roadblocks and begin writing more easily and quickly (Bean, 2011; Hilliard, 2018). Finally, elaborated directions also can support students with or at risk for writing disabilities in producing genre-specific responses (Ferretti & Lewis, 2019).

Recommendation 3: Accessible and Fair Prompts

A final quality of good prompts is their accessibility and fairness for students of different ages and backgrounds (Miller & Crocker, 1990; White, 2019). With respect to age, recall that prompts for formative assessments emulating the state test might include one or more passages to supply background information for students. Therefore, the overall length and language complexity of the passage(s) and prompt should be appropriate for students' age level. This may be determined with readability measures, such as Lexile®, which provide a way to gauge the grade-appropriateness of the words and sentences in the prompt. Prompts used for different formative assessment administrations within a grade also should be written at a consistent length and difficulty level to ensure that students' performance reflects their abilities and not any changes in the challenge of the task (Crawford et al., 2004; Lim, 2010). Similarly, although administering prompts of different genres can yield a more complete picture of students' writing abilities (Mo & Troia, 2017; Wilson et al., 2021), multiple administrations of a single genre is

needed to track growth in the skills that define that type of writing, as indicated by the unique

rubrics for each genre on a state writing test (e.g., Pearson Education, n.d.a; TDOE, n.d.).

To avoid triggering stress and anxiety for students of different backgrounds, the prompts

should also follow sensible fairness guidelines (Miller & Crocker, 1990; White, 2019). This

means they should avoid politically or socially controversial issues as well as potentially

offensive or sensitive material that might exclude students based on their social identities of race,

ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, language, ability, or sexual orientation. Thus,

Recommendation 3 may involve a delicate interplay between the interest of relatable issues

(Recommendation 1) and their likelihood for producing negative reactions. Fairness applies not

only to topics, but also to the wording as prompts that contain undefined jargon, colloquialisms,

cultural references, or rare vocabulary may disadvantage some students (Broer et al., 2005).

The above criteria can serve as guidance to teachers for how to identify or create high-

quality writing prompts for gathering formative data on their students. In the next section, we

offer a model for this process by describing how we developed and revised prompts for a middle

school Tier 2 literacy intervention.

Developing Authentic Writing Prompts

Initially, we attempted to apply the research-based criteria for high-quality prompts by

creating formative writing assessments that tasked students with comparing the details of two

passages – explaining a topic or phenomenon or summarizing a piece of information. As shown

in the Grade 7 sample in Appendix A of the supplementary file, the prompt addressed a relevant

issue in students' lives (COVID-19) for comparison to the Spanish Flu of 1918. In field testing

these versions, we found that student responses tended to include a significant amount of

language copied from the passage(s), which did not sufficiently demonstrate students' writing

skills (see example student response in Appendix A of the supplementary file). In addition, although there were no indications that the prompt structured this way triggered stress among our students, there was a potential for students to react emotionally to the COVID-19 pandemic portion of the topic. To remedy these issues, we revised the prompts in several ways as shown in Appendix B of the supplementary file and explained by recommendation in the sections that follow.

Applying Recommendation 1: Interesting and Relevant Prompts

First, we rewrote the prompts to be more topically engaging for students by presenting a realistic problem to solve or a scenario that was relevant to the students' lives, while avoiding the potential for triggering stress or anxiety (Recommendation 3). We believed this would encourage students to write using original language instead of copied language. Further, because the middle school students were in Tier 2 literacy interventions, we were attentive to how we could motivate the reluctant writers by reducing the cognitive load with topic familiarity. Prompt A, for example, poses the situation of choosing a class field trip destination. Prompt B presents a situation in which a family wants to adopt a new pet. Both revised prompts are more positive, relatable experiences than the original topic, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Then, using the familiar topics as a springboard, we wanted to further foster student engagement with a task that required them to synthesize information or create something entirely new. Whereas a student may simply repeat passage details in a comparison or summarizing essay, explanation via synthesis requires students to show their thought processes and make a connection or a point that is not already provided in the source passages. In short, our intent was to create a more involved task, paired with a familiar topic, to motivate students to write.

Each of the sample prompts shown in Appendix B of the supplementary file includes three passages: the first passage is a set of goals or guidelines (*Class Learning Goals* for Prompt A; *The Yang Family Details* for Prompt B), followed by two passages detailing two very different options (*The Raptor Project Flyer* and *McLaren Botanical Gardens* for Prompt A; *Pet Description: Willow* and *Pet Description: Murphy* for Prompt B). The passages offer different types of text that students would see in real life such as in flyers and promotional materials.

Applying Recommendation 2: Prompts With Clear Expectations

As illustrated in the prompts, students were given specific instructions about their task. Specifically, they were directed to read the three passages, choose one of the options presented, and then write an essay explaining why that option was a good choice based on the goals or guidelines outlined in the first passage. The prompts also used key words (e.g., *details*, *descriptions*, *information*, *essay*, and *explain*) to indicate to students that they were to write an explanatory essay based on the provided passages. Further, we specified an audience in Prompt A but not in Prompt B. In Prompt A, students were asked to write an essay for their science teacher. However, in Prompt B, students were simply asked to write an essay. When we pilot tested these prompts, we found no significant differences in students' responses to Prompt A compared to Prompt B, but additional research is necessary to determine the effects of audience specificity on the quality of students' writing and their motivation to write.

Applying Recommendation 3: Accessible and Fair Prompts

To ensure accessibility and comparability of prompts, we predefined Lexile® scores and word counts appropriate for Grade 7 intervention students. According to the Lexile® grade-level charts, the range for the 50th to 90th percentiles from national student norms for Grade 7 students is 1060L–1470L (MetaMetrics, 2022a). Therefore, we aimed for the passages to fall within a

lower Lexile® range of 975L–1025L on the Text Analyzer (MetaMetrics, 2022b). That is, we wanted the prompts and passages to be relatively easy for students in the Tier 2 intervention to read and comprehend so as not to detract from the time and effort they could dedicate to writing their essays.

Our rationale behind each passage's word count was twofold. The passages needed to give students enough information from which to draw when writing their responses, yet short enough so that students did not get distracted or confused by passage details. To balance these demands, we tried writing passages of different lengths and settled upon a maximum of about 250 words per passage within a prompt. (The passage word counts for Prompts A and B are provided in Table 1.) The first passage of Prompt A was intentionally kept shorter because it has a content-focused topic as opposed to the everyday life topic in Prompt B. Thus, the passage for Prompt A was developed in a format that would be easier to read and process.

Relatedly, we aimed to avoid bias in the topics and wording that might give some students an advantage (Broer et al., 2005). However, if jargon or topic-specific words could not be avoided or were used for stylistic purposes, we provided additional context to aid students who might not know a given word's meaning. For example, in Prompt A, the word *raptor* was used to describe birds of prey. For students who might not be familiar with this term, we provided two sentences with context clues to support the meaning of *raptor*: "At the Raptor Project, we are proud of our mission to rehabilitate local birds of prey;" "We offer 30-minute demonstrations in which our instructors handle three different raptors – such as hawks, owls, and eagles." In presenting unique terminology in this way, we encouraged students to make the connection that birds they probably recognized (i.e., hawks, owls, and eagles) are birds of prey, which are sometimes called raptors.

Similarly, in Prompt B, the colloquialism "green thumb" was used. To aid students who might not be familiar with this phrase, we added a bullet point that describes the McLaren Botanical Gardens' "do-it-yourself planting classes" that teach visitors about "seed growth" and "how to plant your own seeds to take home and raise." This additional context was included to help students understand that having a "green thumb" refers to being knowledgeable about plants and how to grow them.

Having high-quality prompts is only part of formatively assessing students' writing abilities. The data used for decision making come from scoring the responses produced. In the next section, we explain how to use rubrics that are aligned with the way students are evaluated on state assessments to gauge students' skills and the quality of the prompts.

Using Rubrics in Formative Writing Assessments

A common approach to scoring students' writing on state assessments is applying analytic rubrics (e.g., Florida Department of Education, n.d.; Pearson Education, n.d.a; TDOE, n.d.). These are two-dimensional rubrics that isolate different writing skills and assess a piece of writing based on the student's grade-appropriate demonstration of those skills. The analytic rubric used for the Grade 7 informational writing assessments presented as examples in this paper assessed students' skills in responding to the assigned task (Task), citing textual evidence and expanding on ideas (Development of Evidence), paragraphing and using transitional language (Organization), and using standard writing conventions (Language).

Each skill was scored individually, which may be on a 1–4 or 1–5 scale where the 1 denotes inadequate skill, and the highest value (4 or 5) signifies advanced mastery of the skill. A sample five-point rubric for Grade 7 informational writing is provided in Table 2; a score of 4 was the minimum for proficiency on this instrument. The sample was adapted from the rubric

used for the state assessment (see https://iowa.pearsonaccess.com/rubrics/). Analytic rubrics such as this are specific enough to map onto state standards (as indicated in the first column), but they are also general enough to allow for some freedom in writing style. That is, students are expected to create a standard introduction, body, and conclusion, but also are encouraged to show variety and personalization in the explanations they provide and the language they use to express their ideas. A sample response to Prompt A written by one of our Tier 2 intervention students is provided in Appendix B of the supplementary file, along with the way it was scored.

Writing is an inherently subjective task that can pose many challenges to educators as they evaluate their students' responses (Quinn, 2020). Proper training on applying the rubrics can help improve scoring reliability and minimize teacher subjectivity, as can masking students' identities during the scoring process (Graham et al., 2011; Reed & Mercer, in press). In addition to these teacher factors, the subjective judgments required when using rubrics also pose challenges as teachers encounter the range of ways in which a student might respond to a prompt. Monitoring students' progress and making instructional decisions requires that educators use rubrics in a fair and consistent manner across students and prompts with different characteristics. To that end, we offer five observations or lessons learned from evaluating students' writing in Grade 7 Tier 2 intervention classes.

Observation 1: Writing Volume and Student Motivation

Despite our revision of the prompts to increase motivation to write, most students still tended to produce a single-paragraph response. Therefore, our scoring rubric had to be designed to work irrespective of response length. Analytic rubrics accomplish this by separating scores for the targeted skills so that students can receive credit for the skills they were able to demonstrate (e.g., adequate understanding of the task/passages) while also accounting for weaknesses in other

areas such as paragraphing or language usage. Analytic scoring is beneficial both for monitoring students who have not been performing proficiently and for determining if the prompts need further revision. For example, responding in a single paragraph would not constitute *proficiency* according to the Organization criteria in the sample scoring rubric (see Table 2), but it is worth noting that many of our Tier 2 intervention students provided a coherent and appropriately focused paragraph. It may be that interest in or familiarity with the topic supported students' ability to produce focused responses (Cho, 2019).

Observation 2: Idea Relevancy and Topic Interest

Students in our work demonstrated a range in terms of the relevance of their ideas to the given passages, which was accounted for in the Development of Evidence and Task domains on the sample rubric. A score of 4 in the Development domain signifies that the essay "includes specific evidence from the source passage(s)" and "elaborates successfully on all textual evidence. …" Because analytic rubrics are developed to be general enough to encompass a variety of prompt formats and styles, the instructor must determine how the criteria can be applied to a specific prompt. In our prompts, students were directed to explain why their choice was a good option based on the goals or guidelines. Therefore, we established that successful elaboration meant clearly synthesizing specific information between the two passages the student opted to use. That is, they had to connect the first passage containing the goals or guidelines to selected details from either the second or third passage, depending upon the choice they made.

Similar to other findings from research on students with writing disabilities (Graham et al., 2017), many of the intervention students in our work failed to provide sufficient textual evidence, make clear connections between two passages, or successfully explain those connections. Although they did not demonstrate proficiency, on average, the majority of students

presented on-topic ideas. In addition, they attempted to include personal and text-based details as well as a reasoning for their ideas. Ideas that were on topic but only partially relevant to the task and generally relevant to the passages earned a score of 3 on the rubric. Some students' ideas were on topic but demonstrated confusion about the task and passages, earning a score of 2 on the rubric. Notably, students were able to respond to authentic prompts with ideas that showed some understanding of the topic and task, even when they did not have the skills to achieve proficiency.

Observation 3: Use of Sources and Task Engagement

The Task domain of the rubric addresses students' utilization of given sources. An essay that "responds to all parts of the prompt …" would earn a score of 4 (proficiency) in the Task domain on the sample rubric in Table 2. For our study, "all parts of the prompt" meant that students were to do exactly what the prompt directed them to do: use two passages by choosing one of the provided options (Passage Two or Three) and justifying their choice using the information found in the goals or guidelines passage (first passage). A few of our Tier 2 intervention students were able to achieve proficiency in the Task domain, and many others used at least one of the passages by making a clear choice and providing some relevant ideas, even though the ideas were not clearly connected to the goals or guidelines passage. This partial fulfillment of the task still demonstrated some understanding and engagement from students that could be used to monitor their progress. Moreover, the responses suggest that adolescents with or at risk for writing disabilities still were motivated to try using the provided passages in their writing, which could guide the development of additional prompts.

Observation 4: Use of Original Language

Our original attempt at developing prompts for formative writing assessment resulted in student responses that heavily copied language from the prompt and passages, as mentioned. For example, the scored sample in Appendix A (see supplementary file) shows the student recopied verbatim "schools and public places were closed" from the prompt three times in two sentences of the response. This was true for each of the reasons the student offered: they were all phrases from the prompt repeated multiple times.

When administered the improved prompts, the students more often used their own language to convey their ideas. For example, the scored sample response to Prompt A in Appendix B (see supplementary file) shows the student used novel phrases such as "flight tracking patterns," "learning about the world," "climate controlled buildings so that these plants can thrive," "some people are afraid of these types of birds," and "the pros outweigh the cons." Rather than directly repeating phrases, students offered unique ideas and then rephrased them as in: "Most people have plants by their house that they can look at and study. You don't necessarily have to go to the Botanical Gardens to learn about plants." It is possible the combination of the prompt format and presentation of real-world problems made the improved prompts more interesting to students and fostered greater use of original language.

Observation 5: Genre Confusion

A final lesson learned in our formative assessment work was that using an analytic rubric not only provided insights about students' development of particular writing skills but also about the appropriateness or quality of the prompts administered. For example, we identified that our prompts were somewhat ambiguous as to the writing genre expected of students. Although we used key words to indicate that students were to craft an informational or explanatory essay,

several students framed their responses as opinion or argument. This might have been due to some of the other phrases used in the prompts (e.g., "choose," "you think," "why… you chose") that lend themselves to students offering their opinion or making an argumentative comparison of the choices. Because the perceived issue was with the prompt and not the students' essays, we revised the prompt language to more clearly ask for explanatory writing (see Appendix C of the supplementary file for the revised Prompts A and B). For example, we stated, "Be sure to use information from the given sources to write your explanation," rather than, "… write an essay in which you explain why … you chose. …"

Implications for Practice

There are several implications of our work for teachers' implementation of formative writing assessments in Tier 2 interventions. First, teachers might review prompts by asking the following questions related to the research-based recommendations (Broer et al., 2005; Ferretti & Lewis, 2019; Miller & Crocker, 1990; White, 2019):

- *Recommendation 1: Are the prompts interesting and relevant?*
  - Will students have some familiarity with the topic?
  - Is the topic relevant to students' lives?
  - Is it necessary to use original ideas and language to address the prompt, or can a response simply copy provided information?
- *Recommendation 2: Do the prompts set clear expectations?*
  - Is the expected genre clearly communicated?
  - Are there specific directions for the writing task and, if relevant, the audience?
  - Is it clear what students are to do with the provided background information?
- *Recommendation 3: Are the prompts accessible and fair to all students?*

  o   Is the prompt at a readability level students can understand?

  o   If administering multiple prompts across time, are all prompts of equal difficulty?

  o   Does the prompt supply enough background information and direction to support students without distracting them from the task?

  o   Is there sufficient contextual support for any challenging words or expressions?

The second implication of our findings is that teachers may need to consider whether the rubrics used for evaluating students' writing can be applied across prompts and to responses of different lengths and styles. Rubrics that are too rigidly designed may not be able to identify what skills students with or at risk for writing disabilities are developing, even when they still cannot demonstrate proficiency in all skills or with all writing tasks. Pointing out too many mistakes or never giving students a sense of their progress can become defeating and counter-productive to the goals of formative assessment (Graham et al., 2011). Relatedly, fair and reliable application of rubrics across prompts and students may require more training or additional steps to mask students' identities during scoring than teachers are accustomed to doing (Reed & Mercer, in press).

The final implication for teachers is that planning for formative writing assessment should be focused on ensuring that the data gathered for making instructional decisions are of high quality. Analytic rubrics map onto standards and can reveal how elements of students' writing are contributing to the overall quality of their responses. Such information is useful for grouping students in the intervention for targeted lessons (Espin et al., 2004). For example, students who exhibit difficulty in responding to all parts of a prompt (the Task domain on the rubric in Table 2) may need intervention in how to break down a prompt to understand what is being requested, whereas students who have difficulty supporting and explaining their ideas (the

Development domain) may need intervention in identifying and appropriately using relevant textual evidence.

Conclusion

Formative assessments are conducted during the learning process and present opportunities for students to practice demonstrating skills they learned and inform the next steps in their learning. Yet, if students are reluctant to write, they will not take advantage of the practice opportunity or produce enough grist for their teachers to truly understand how they are developing as writers. By applying research-based criteria, teachers can develop or identify high-quality prompts that will accomplish the goals of formatively assessing their students' writing skills and state assessment readiness. In our work with Tier 2 intervention students in middle school, we observed reasonable responses that would generate worthwhile data for making instructional decisions. It is possible that fair and accessible writing prompts with relevant, real-world situations interested students and motivated them to write and to use original language in those responses, even when they demonstrated difficulties with one or more on-grade-level skills (Wright et al., 2020).

Furthermore, responses of all lengths were scorable using an analytic rubric. Like rubrics that accompany state assessments, the rubric we used was phrased generally – based on state standards – to accommodate any informational writing prompt. However, the scoring rationale could be tailored to the specific expectations in the prompts administered. The ability to directly tie prompt expectations to state standards means that analytic rubrics may be used to provide specific feedback to students about their successes in developing grade-appropriate writing skills and the steps they might take to continue making progress toward proficiency (Espin et al., 2004). Important, rubrics and prompts can be reciprocally beneficial to delivering Tier 2 literacy

interventions in that good prompts foster student responses, and good rubrics foster refining

instruction in the targeted skills as well as the quality of the prompts themselves.

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Table 1

Passage Word Counts by Prompt

Prompt	Word Count
Prompt A	
Passage 1: Class Learning Goals	78
Passage 2: The Raptor Project Flyer	253
Passage 3: McLaren Botanical Gardens Flyer	236
Prompt B	
Passage 1: The Yang Family Details	167
Passage 2: Pet Description: Willow	256
Passage 3: Pet Description: Murphy	241

Table 2

Sample Grade 7 Informational Writing Rubric

Criteria	Score*				
	1	2	3	4	5
Task (Information and Purpose) CCSS: RI7.1 W7.2	• Responds with ideas that are irrelevant or off-focus. • Demonstrates little to no understanding of the topic/text(s) and purpose.	• Responds with ideas that may be relevant to the prompt, but these ideas lack focus. • Demonstrates limited understanding of topic/text(s) and purpose by providing an unclear explanation.	• Responds partially to the prompt with ideas that are somewhat focused. • Demonstrates a general understanding of the topic/text(s) and purpose by providing a clear explanation within the response as a whole.	• Responds to all parts of the prompt with consistent focus. • Demonstrates an adequate understanding of the topic/text(s) and purpose by providing a clear explanation at the beginning of the response.	• Responds skillfully to all parts of the prompt with consistent focus. • Demonstrates a strong understanding of the topic/text(s) and purpose by providing a thoughtful context for the explanation and a clear explanation at the beginning of the response.
Development of Evidence CCSS: RI7.1 W7.2b W7.8 W7.9b	• Response does not include facts, details, examples, and/or textual evidence. • No attempt is made to use evidence from credible sources or provided texts to support the explanation. • Development of the topic(s) lacks explanation of ideas, only repeats ideas, or most ideas are not relevant. • Demonstrates a lack of understanding of the purpose of explanatory writing.	• Includes minimal, repetitive, and/or irrelevant facts, details, examples, and/or textual evidence in the explanation. • Attempts to use evidence from credible sources or provided texts are unsuccessful (text sections are lifted exactly, misunderstood, or not relevant to the explanation). • Explains the topic(s) by providing some information, but explanation is minimal and/or superficial, and parts may be repetitious or irrelevant.	• Includes few or only general facts, details, examples, and/or textual evidence in the explanation. • Uses evidence from credible sources or provided texts, but it is limited, overused, or misrepresented. • Uses some information that may be repetitious or may not be clearly relevant. • Explains the topic(s) to a limited extent, or the explanation is developed unevenly.	• Includes some specific and relevant facts, definitions, details, examples, and/or other appropriate information in the explanation. • Uses some evidence from credible sources or provided texts appropriately to support the explanation. • Explains the topic(s) adequately.	• Uses ample specific and relevant facts, definitions, details, examples, and/or other appropriate information in the explanation. • Uses ample relevant evidence from credible sources or provided texts to support the explanation. • Explains the topic(s) completely.
Organization CCSS: W7.2a W7.2c W7.2e W7.4	• Lacks an introduction and a concluding statement or section. • Demonstrates no understanding of paragraphing (or response may be too short to assess). • Uses no transitions.	• Has minimal evidence of an introduction and/or a concluding statement or section. • Groups a few related ideas together within the response but, overall, demonstrates weak paragraphing. • Uses incorrect or vague transitions that cause confusion.	• Provides a basic introduction and a basic concluding statement or section. • Groups related ideas together, but the relationship among ideas may, at times, be unclear, or parts of the explanation may seem out of place. • Uses some transitions within and/or between sections of text.	• Provides a clear, somewhat-developed introduction. • Provides a clear concluding statement or section. • Organizes ideas adequately, using appropriate paragraphing. • Uses consistently simple and/or repetitive transitions within and between sections of text.	• Has a clear, well-developed introduction. • Provides a logical concluding statement or section. • Organizes ideas effectively, linking paragraphs to create a cohesive whole. • Uses consistently effective and varied transition words, phrases, and clauses within and between major sections of text to enhance coherence.
Language CCSS: L7.1 L7.2 W7.2d	• Uses awkward, incorrect, and/or confusing word choice and sentence structures. • Fails to achieve an objective tone and/or a formal style appropriate for the designated audience and purpose; tone or style is distracting. • Makes many errors in conventions that significantly interfere with meaning. • Response is too short to assess whether student has knowledge of writing conventions.	• Uses simple and/or repetitive word choice. • Uses simple, repetitive sentence structures and/or run-on sentences. • Demonstrates limited understanding of an objective tone and/or a formal style appropriate for designated audience and purpose; tone or style is somewhat distracting. • Makes several errors in conventions that frequently interfere with meaning.	• Uses general word choice. • Attempts to employ topic-specific vocabulary may be unsuccessful. • Demonstrates some variety in sentence structures but attempts at more complex structures result in errors. • Demonstrates some understanding of an objective tone and a formal style appropriate for the designated audience and purpose but fails to maintain that tone/style throughout the explanation. • Makes a few errors in conventions that occasionally interfere with meaning.	• Uses mostly specific and somewhat-varied word choice. • Occasionally employs topic-specific vocabulary successfully. • Demonstrates adequate variety in sentence structures. • Establishes an objective tone and a formal style appropriate for the designated audience and purpose and maintains that tone/style throughout most of the explanation. • Response may contain some minor errors in conventions that do not interfere with meaning.	• Uses precise and varied word choice. • Employs topic-specific vocabulary successfully. • Effectively varies sentence length and complexity. • Establishes an objective tone and a formal style appropriate for the designated audience and purpose and maintains that tone/style throughout the explanation. • Response demonstrates mastery of grade-level conventions.

Supplementary Materials: Sample Grade 7 Writing Prompts

Appendix A: Original Informational Writing Prompt

Global Pandemics

Global pandemics are rare but can cause public health and economic catastrophes. After World War I, the world faced a war against an invisible enemy – the Spanish Flu of 1918. As soldiers returned home from war, the virus spread vastly.

The Spanish Flu was foreign to epidemiologists; thus, medical treatments were unknown. Nearly 500 million people were infected, and at least 50 million people died from the Spanish Flu worldwide. Mortality rates were high in people younger than 5 years old, 20–40 years old, and 65 years and older. Consequently, schools and public places were closed, and face coverings were mandated by public health officials.

Another global pandemic occurred in 2019–2020 when COVID-19 was discovered. The origin of the virus is unknown; however, China was the first country to expose the severity of the virus. The convenience of international traveling made it nearly impossible to mitigate the spreading of the virus. COVID-19 was novel to epidemiologists and other public health officials, and there were no pharmaceutical treatments or vaccinations to help prevent the deadly illness. By the fall of 2020, the Worldwide Health Organization reported 33.5 million cases and 1 million deaths worldwide. As a result, many states and local governments mandated mask-wearing and social distancing like school closings.

Writing Prompt

In the passages "Global Pandemics," you read about two worldwide pandemics that affected millions of people around the world. Respond by describing the similarities between the Spanish Flu of 1918 and COVID-19 of 2019–2020. Use evidence from the passage to support your response.

Sample Tier 2 Intervention Student Response to the Original Informational Prompt

[Note that the response is exactly as typed by the student. Any spelling, grammatical, and mechanical errors were in the original.]

> The Spanish Flu of 1819 and COVID-19 were very similar global pandemics. These pandemics were very similar beause of 3 factors. First they were similar because schools and pulic places were closed. This makes them similar because in 1819 during the Spanish Flu schools and public places were closed, and now in 2019-2020 during the COVID outbreak some schools and public places are closed. Another similarity the Spanish Flu and COVID-19 share are face coverings of masks. This is similar because back in 1819 public health officals made face coverings mandatory, now during COVID-19 face coverings or masks are mandadtory by public health officals and the governors of each state. Finally the Spanish Flu and COVID-19 are similar because doctors and scientist didn't know the cure for the outbreak or they didn't know what the virus was. For example in 1819 doctors didn't know what the virus was, they didn't know how to get rid of it, now in 2019-2020 no one knew what the virus was or where it came from. This means if doctors in 2019-2020 didn't know what it was or where it came from they wouldn't be able to cure it. These 3 reasons are why the Spanish Flu of 1819 and COVID-19 are very similar global pandemics.

Scoring of the Sample Response to the Original Informational Prompt

Task = 3. The writer somewhat responds to the prompt but with inconsistent focus. The writer demonstrates understanding of the topic and text throughout the response by describing similarities between both the 1918 flu and the COVID-19 pandemics.

Development = 2. The writer includes specific and relevant facts but is repetitive and relies upon copied information without explanations or elaborations. The writer repeats the facts that "schools and public places were closed" rather than developing those ideas. The writer attempts to develop the evidence from the text by describing the use of face masks. The writer somewhat develops the ideas of the doctors' response to both pandemics by describing "they didn't know what the virus was, they did not know how to get rid of it …"

Organization = 3. The writer begins with a lead describing the similarities between the two topics. The response includes transition words, including *First … another, finally, and for example* to transition between one idea and another. The written response ends with a closing sentence reflecting on the similarities between the two topics. The transitions between text subjects are simple. The response is not separated into clear paragraph structures.

Language = 2. The writing includes subject-specific vocabulary *Spanish Flu … face coverings … governors* to further the response. The word choice is somewhat varied. The writing includes repetitive sentence structures. The written response demonstrates limited understanding of a formal tone.

Appendix B: Improved Grade 7 Informational Writing Prompts, Version 1

Writing Prompt A

Imagine that your science teacher wants your help planning an upcoming field trip. She gives you a list of learning goals that she wants the class to accomplish by going on this trip. She also gives you an informational flyer from a bird rescue center along with a flyer from a botanical garden. Read the list of learning goals as well as the two flyers. Choose which field trip destination you think fulfills the goals your teacher hopes your class will achieve. Then, write an essay in which you explain to the teacher why the destination you chose would make a good learning experience for the class.

Passage 1: Class Learning Goals. *This list from the teacher outlines the learning goals she wants your science class to accomplish by going on a field trip to a natural environment.*

Our Field Trip Goals

- Discover something new about a plant, animal, or other aspect of nature

- Learn about the different ways humans interact with nature

- Gain an appreciation for the preservation of nature

- Understand the importance of studying plants, animals, and the habitats they live in

- Have a hands-on learning experience

Passage 2: The Raptor Project Flyer. At The Raptor Project, we are proud of our mission to rescue and rehabilitate local birds of prey. We are also proud to provide various educational opportunities. Our aim is to teach students about the importance of protecting these birds and their natural habitats.

Wings and the World

Did you know that birds can help us understand climate change and shifting weather patterns? Learn about these fun facts and more during our weekly interactive classes. These classes explain how studying birds' migration patterns and tracking their population sizes help us understand our world.

Raptors: Live!

We offer 30-minute demonstrations in which our instructors handle three different raptors – such as hawks, owls, and eagles. They explain how each raptor lives and hunts in the wild. They also discuss the needs each bird has while living in captivity.

Meet Our Residents

Join a guided tour of the center to hear the unique stories of how each of our raptors came to us. Some were injured by humans through hunting or habitat destruction. Others are endangered

species. Our tours inform the public of our efforts to heal these birds and release them back into the wild. Our conservation work helps save endangered raptors from extinction and protect the ecosystems in which they live.

Hands-on Fun!

For our hands-on learners, we offer a special activity that gets students directly involved with the care of our raptors: making them toys! Students can practice their crafting skills and learn about why toys are important for raptors in captivity.

Passage 3: McLaren Botanical Gardens Flyer. *Heliconia, bird of paradise, plumeria.* What do these words have in common? They're all exotic plants that can be found at the McLaren Botanical Gardens, of course! At the Botanical Gardens, we immerse your students into a new world of color and life.

McLaren's Mission

Our climate-controlled gardens make it possible for us to replicate plant habitats from anywhere in the world. This allows us to grow and research exotic plants. Many of these plants grow in places, like rainforests, that humans are destroying at alarming rates. We want to teach students about how plants, like animals, can be in danger of extinction. We hope to inform students of this danger and inspire them to care about our planet and all its living organisms.

The Botanical Gardens offers multiple learning activities, too! Check them out!

- Have you ever wondered why scientists study plants from all over the world? Or how plants can help reduce pollution and produce medicine? Take one of our self-guided audio tours and find out about the incredible things plants do for us and our planet!

- Budding plant enthusiasts will love our scavenger hunt! Explore all parts of our garden and learn about plants you have likely never heard of before.

- Ready to develop that green thumb of yours? Wait no longer! In our do-it-yourself planting classes, learn about seed growth and how to plant your own seeds to take home and raise.

Writing Prompt B

The Yang family goes to the local animal shelter to adopt a new pet, and they see many wonderful animals. They narrow their choice down to an older dog and a young kitten. First, read the list of details about the Yang family. Also read the two pet descriptions the animal shelter workers wrote for Willow and Murphy. Choose which pet you think meets the needs of the Yang family. Then, use information from the given sources to write an essay in which you explain why the pet you chose would be a good addition to the Yang family.

Passage 1: The Yang Family Details. Before taking a trip to the animal shelter, Mr. Yang, Mrs. Yang, and their two daughters, Mai and Christy, created a list of details about their family that they think are important to keep in mind when choosing a new pet.

Details About Our Family

- Mai is 3 years old; we need a pet that is good with younger children.

- Christy is 8 years old and very active. She would like a pet that she can play with.

- We live in an apartment, so our new pet cannot be too big or rambunctious.

- Both parents work full-time jobs away from home. We want a pet that is well-trained and comfortable being home alone during weekdays.

- We already have one cat in our apartment, so the new pet must be good around other animals.

- Our apartment has a nice deck and yard space where we spend a lot of time as a family. A pet who would also enjoy being in those areas would be great for us.

Passage 2: Pet Description: Willow. Meet your new best friend and companion: Willow!

This beautiful lady is a black Labrador Retriever/Blue Heeler mix, and she is ready to come home with you today! At 9 years old, Willow is one of our older residents here, but don't let that fool you. This sweet girl still has some spunk in her. Willow loves to go on long walks and occasional short runs. She will also happily frolic in the grass and play a game of fetch with you any time, any day.

Willow is a medium-sized dog who is well-behaved, so you will never have to worry about her while she is indoors. She is completely house trained and kennel trained, and as long as she has a few toys and a quiet place to sleep, she is content to spend hours home alone with no accidents or problems. Willow also knows a few basic commands – *like sit, lay*, and *stay* – but this is one old dog who *can* learn new tricks! She is very smart and attentive, and she is always eager to find new ways to impress her people.

All of us at the shelter would characterize Willow's personality as laid-back and lovable. She is known to be good with both kids and other animals, as her previous family had a young child and another dog.

It's not every day you come across pure canine perfection and yet, here is perfection staring you in the face with loving brown eyes and a wet nose. Don't waste another moment; adopt Willow today!

Passage 3: Pet Description: Murphy. Here he is, folks: the purr-fect addition to your home. Meet Murphy!

This orange tabby kitten is the cutest thing on four furry legs. He is about one year old now and has all the energy you would expect! He plays with every kind of toy under the sun, which makes him very good at keeping himself entertained for hours on end. Murphy is the most sociable boy, who is happy to meet anyone that is willing to be his friend, including kids! He came from a large litter of kittens brought to us from a nearby farm, so he would be best in an active home with children or other pets that can play with him.

Murphy is also an expert birdwatcher. He can spend entire afternoons contentedly perched on his indoor cat tree, observing the birds outside. With a leash and some supervision, Murphy would likely enjoy some occasional time outside, whether it is on a patio, deck, or fenced-in yard. He is curious and adventurous, and he loves to explore!

But don't let his spirited nature make you think he would be too much of a handful. Murphy is fully litterbox trained and is a total snuggle bug who loves to take long naps. He also adores his scratching post, so you don't have to worry about him ruining your furniture.

We're not "kitten" around here; "meow's" the time to make Murphy the newest member of your family!

Sample Tier 2 Intervention Student Response to Prompt A

The Raptor Project is a valid option because they met all of your learning goals. At the Raptor Project you can get hands-on experience by making toys for the birds. You can learn about how humans are interacting with those bords to get them healthy again. Learning about how humans interact with those birds shows us the importance of those birds in the ecosystems. You can gain an appreciation of preserving nature by listening to the stories of how the bird came into the care of humans. Lastly, you can discover how tracking flight patterns and population sizes are beneficial towards learning about the world.

The McLaren Botanical Gardens also met your learning goals. We can discover something new when they teach us about plant species that don't live in America. At the Botanical Gardens they have climate controlled buildings so that these plants can thrive, more so than in their habitats that are being destroyed by humans. We learn about the importance of this Garden when they explain that in the wild their habitat would e gone. There is also a class to teach you about how plants grow and how you can grow your own plants. They teach you to appreciate Gardens like these when you see all of the plants that are able to thrive here.

There are pros and cons to the Raptor Project. The pros are that it meets those learning goals and will keep everyone interested. On the other hand, some people are afraid of these types of birds and won't enjoy the time that we have there. I think that the pros outweigh the cons.

There are also pros and cons to the McLaren Botanical Gardens. Again, it meets your learning goals but it might not keep everyone interested. Most people have plants by their house that they can look at and study. You don't necessarily have to go to the Botanical Gardens to learn about plants.

In conclusion, I think that we should go to the Raptor Project. Here, we will learn and stay interested in the topics at the same time. I hope you take these things into consideration.

Scoring of the Sample Response to Prompt A

Task = 5. This writer responds skillfully to all parts of the prompt with a consistent focus. The writer addresses all three passages (the Raptor Project, the McLaren Botanical Gardens, and the class learning goals) and shows a strong understanding of the task through her synthesis of information (*The Raptor Project is a valid option because they met all your learning goals …*; *The McLaren Botanical Gardens also met your learning goals …*). She also places the information in a thoughtful context, which offers additional factors that could contribute to the fittingness of each destination: *There are pros and cons to the Raptor Project*; *There are pros and cons to the McLaren Botanical Gardens …* After addressing both passages and weighing the additional pros and cons of both field trip destinations, the writer clearly comes to the conclusion that the Raptor Project is a good choice because students *will learn and stay interested in the topics at the same time*.

Development = 5. This writer provides ample textual evidence and complete, logical explanation. The writer effectively connects all class learning goals to the relevant details found in both the Raptor Project's flyer (*At the Raptor Project you can get hands-on experience by making toys for the birds*; *You can learn about how humans are interacting with those birds to get them healthy again*; *You can gain an appreciation of preserving nature by listening to the stories of how the bird came into the care of humans*, etc.) and the Botanical Garden's flyer (*We can discover something new when they teach us about plant species that don't live in America*; *We learn about the importance of this Garden when they explain that in the wild their habitat would be gone*; etc.). The writer also offers additional inferences in her discussion of the pros and cons of both destinations.

Organization = 4. Although this response does not include a clear introduction, the writer shows proficient organizational skills through her logical paragraphing, transitional language to distinguish ideas from each other (*Lastly*; *The McLaren Botanical Gardens also*; *There is also*; *On the other hand*; *There are also pros and cons to the McLaren Botanical Gardens*; *In conclusion*), and clear concluding paragraph that succinctly wraps up the essay.

Language = 5. The writer demonstrates reasonable variety in her sentence structures, with some sentences demonstrating more complexity and syntactical skill: *At the Botanical Gardens they have climate controlled buildings so that these plants can thrive, more so than in their habitats that are being destroyed by humans*. The writer's word choice is precise and varied as well: *valid option*; *came into the care of humans*; *beneficial*; *thrive*; *outweigh*; *consideration*. The tone is consistently objective throughout, as is the formal writing style. Although the response includes somewhat repetitive sentence beginnings, the writer still shows strong syntactical control and a clear comfortability with language.

Appendix C: Improved Grade 7 Informational Writing Prompts, Version 2

[Note that the three passages for each prompt were not revised, so they are not recopied here. Only the prompt portions were revised as provided below.]

Writing Prompt A

Imagine that your science teacher wants your help planning an upcoming field trip. She gives you a list of learning goals that she wants the class to accomplish by going on this trip. She also gives you an informational flyer from a bird rescue center along with a flyer from a botanical garden. Read the list of class learning goals as well as the two flyers. Based on the goals your teacher hopes your class will achieve, choose a suitable field trip destination. Then, write an essay in which you explain to the teacher why that destination would make a good learning experience for the class. Be sure to use information from the given sources to write your explanation.

Writing Prompt B

The Yang family goes to the local animal shelter to adopt a new pet, and they see many wonderful animals. They narrow their choices down to an older dog and a young kitten. First, read the list of details about the Yang family. Also read the two pet descriptions the animal shelter workers wrote for Willow and Murphy. Based on the Yang family's needs, choose a suitable pet. Then, write an essay in which you explain why that pet would be a good addition to the Yang family. Be sure to use information from the given sources to write your explanation.