Not Just Handwriting and Spelling: Assessing Early Composing Skills

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Ms. Tomlinson's pre-kindergarten class has been working on writing narratives. During a busy center time, 4-year-old Noah has chosen to work in the writing center on a story he has been adding to throughout the week. Ms. Tomlinson examines his written product to gain information about his writing development: she sees a collection of tight, linear scribbles and drawings on Noah's paper. While some might interpret the work as drawing or art rather than writing, Ms. Tomlinson knows that there is more to the story, so to speak.

Ms. Tomlinson is observing Noah's engagement in a stage of the writing process: his mark making, coupled with his explanation of those marks, indicates that he is translating his ideas into text with purpose. In other words, Noah is *composing*. (See "Key Terms in Early Childhood Composition" below.) Yet instruction and assessment in preschool settings often focus on *transcription* skills, particularly letter formation and estimated spelling, also referred to as invented spelling (Rowe 2015; Gerde, Wright, & Bingham 2019). This practice positions composing as a skill that develops after transcription. However, research shows that preschool children whose teachers were observed supporting composition demonstrated stronger writing skills at the end of the school year than children whose teachers were observed focusing more on transcription (Bingham, Quinn, & Gerde 2017).

Composition in early childhood is still an area of growing research. Indeed, a shared, comprehensive understanding of early composing—what it is, how it develops, how to effectively support children's development of it, and how best to assess it—is lacking (Quinn & Bingham 2019). This, coupled with the limited research base on early composing, may be causing the disconnect between research and practice. Additionally, this disconnect may be fostered by state and national writing standards. While about one-third of all state early learning writing standards addresses composing, more standards specifically emphasize handwriting. This is the case even though children are expected by kindergarten to write across genres and for different purposes (NGA & CCSSO 2010; Tortorelli et al. 2022).

As researchers of composition in early childhood education, we have observed many children as they go through the plan-write-review process. In general, we have found that children demonstrate three signs or indicators of composing in their writing—transcription, connection, and discourse—in varied ways. These indicators tend to relate to each other too. Here are some more specific findings from our work

- Related to connection, most children demonstrate a strong connection between what they say they plan to write and what they say they actually wrote.
- Related to discourse, when we look at their writing, most children actually write fewer ideas. This tells us that a transformation occurs: as they go through the plan-write-review process, they share fewer but more coherent ideas in their writing.
- Connection and discourse interact with transcription skills. In other words, the writing of children who demonstrate advanced estimated spelling often reflects a stronger connection of fewer ideas than children who demonstrate emergent transcription or early estimated spelling.

In this article, we provide an expanded approach to assessing the development of writing produced by children ages 3 to 5. We begin by outlining the writing process framework, which we call plan-write-review, and share examples of each step in action, as illustrated by Noah and Ms. Tomlinson. We then explore how teachers can assess three components of composition—transcription, connection, and discourse—and use this information to inform their practice.

While we draw on foundational approaches to writing assessment that primarily concentrate on transcription and/or handwriting, we go beyond them by focusing on how teachers can observe and understand children's early composing through their products, processes, and purposes for writing. The plan-write-review framework and the general composition assessment practices discussed in this article apply to many kinds of writing. However, here we narrow the scope to narrative writing because practitioners in early childhood settings regularly engage children in literacy experiences connected to fictional stories, folktales, and fairytales.

Key Terms in Early Childhood Composition

Composition: Idea generation beyond the single-word level (Puranik & Lonigan 2014) using written language, oral language, or drawing. Components include transcription, connection, and discourse (Quinn & Rohloff 2021).

Transcription: Handwriting and spelling, including letter formation, letter identification, and letter-sound associations, spanning from estimations to conventional forms and spellings (Puranik & Lonigan 2011; Cabell, Tortorelli, & Gerde 2013).

Connection: The relationship between ideas produced in the plan-write-review process. In other words, the connection between what children say they plan to write, what they write or draw, and what they say they wrote after they have finished (Rowe & Wilson 2015; Quinn, Bingham, & Gerde 2021).

Discourse: The nature of ideas generated in the plan-write-review process; that is, the relevance of ideas to the writing context; the number, quality, and structure of ideas; and how ideas transform from the plan step to the review step (Rowe & Wilson 2015; Quinn & Rohloff 2021).

Steps for Supporting Composition: Plan, Write, and Review

To assess writing, teachers must first get children to write, so they have products and processes to document and interpret. Early childhood educators can teach and support early writing in many ways, including through explicit instruction (such as modeling letter writing while drawing attention to the letter names and shapes formed) and through guided and playful experiences (such as shared writing of a menu during restaurant dramatic play). While teachers may have dedicated times for developing writing skills in larger and smaller group formats, writing can—and should—happen across the curriculum and at various parts of the preschool day; providing writing materials and learning experiences are critical and considered part of quality practice (Gerde, Bingham, & Wasik 2012).

Step 1: Plan

Ms. Tomlinson watches as Noah begins to make a drawing of a dog. "What are you working on?" she asks him.

Noah responds, "It's about when my dog got sick."

Ms. Tomlinson recognizes that Noah is about to engage in writing a narrative, a genre the class has been exploring in their writing unit. Noah finishes his drawing, then pauses. Ms. Tomlinson can see that he is thinking about what to write next. To encourage this planning process, she asks, "Maybe you can talk about what happened after he got sick? Did you need to take him to the vet?"

"We did. I'm going to write about that," Noah says and begins to add more linear scribbles to his paper in a left-to-right motion, just below his picture of the dog.

"That sounds like a great plan! I can't wait to see how the story ends," Ms. Tomlinson tells him.

When exploring narrative genres, educators can easily make writing connections to the stories they are reading in class by asking questions about familiar genre conventions or traits of stories and discussing their narrative elements. In addition, prompting children to borrow ideas from model narrative texts for use in their own stories helps to show them that writers plan their compositions and that their plans can be based on a combination of imagination and external influences.

Regardless of the genre children explore in their writings, they often need help at the plan step. Teachers can encourage children to verbalize their intentions for writing by asking questions like those Ms. Tomlinson asked Noah during his planning process. Once children have an initial idea, additional questions or statements of encouragement will prompt them toward a direction where they can begin composing with some independence. For example, questions like "Let's plan your story. What do you want to start with?" and "What else happened when we went on our field trip that you can add to your story?" can serve as helpful encouragement. In addition to asking these types of questions, teachers can refer to the child's plan while they are engaged in the writing process: "You said that you were going to write about your time at the pool with Grandma. Are you still writing about that?" Guiding young writers with questions can increase intentionality and connection across the plan-write-review process and build children's understanding of how writing works.

Step 2: Writing and Support Writing

Noah pauses as if contemplating. Ms. Tomlinson wants to grasp Noah's understanding of writing processes better, so she asks, "What are you going to write next?"

Noah smiles. "It was Papa who took Boots to the vet."

Ms. Tomlinson offers additional encouragement. "You should write that down!" After Noah makes more linear scribbles on his page, Ms. Tomlinson says, "Tell me about what you wrote."

Noah traces his finger back and forth across the page and says, "Papa took Boots to the vet. And the vet gave him yucky medicine. And Boots got all better."

When children engage in mark making, teachers can harness opportunities for assessment by observing and recording these moments to understand the three indicators or signs of composition (transcription, connection, and discourse). Early childhood educators commonly observe and document children's learning and development. The same techniques apply here too: Teachers can gather and analyze children's writing samples (with and without specific writing prompts being given). They can observe and take anecdotal notes, photographs, and videos as children write. As they gather information, educators can also elicit more details about children's composition by asking questions and facilitating children's talk about their writing. Prompts like "What else did you want to write about?" and "Tell me about this part of your writing" can offer critical insights into their compositions.

When children engage in mark making, teachers can harness opportunities for assessment to understand the three indicators or signs of composition.

Paper and pencil writing can provide details about children's skills, but practitioners can also transcribe children's composition ideas to capture information about their progress in discourse. This alleviates some of the cognitive burden related to transcription and allows children to express ideas more freely. Particularly for children with emerging transcription skills, educators can help them identify the sounds they hear in words. For example, a practitioner might say, "You want to write 'Happy Birthday'? Let's figure out some sounds we hear." The dictation process is important because it models writing processes for beginning writers and develops their understanding of the relationship between text and drawings. For children with stronger transcription skills, teachers can focus on writing the child's words that are more demanding phonologically. For instance, Ms. Tomlinson could assist Noah by writing the word *better* but ask him to attempt writing the word *sick*.

Step 3: Review

Ms. Tomlinson notices that Noah has put down his pencil. She goes over to him and asks, "Did you finish your story?"

"Uh-huh, it's done," he replies.

This is the step at which Ms. Tomlinson reviews with Noah what he wrote to see how closely it connects to his original plan: "Can you tell me about what you wrote? I want to make sure I remember."

Noah looks at his paper and reads, "Once upon a time, Papa took Boots to the vet. And the vet gave him yucky medicine. And Boots got all better. The end."

Ms. Tomlinson's assessment of Noah's finished story tells her that it not only connects to his initial writing plan but also expands on it. In addition to his plan, she recognizes that Noah generated ideas during his composing that addressed the administration of medication and healing, which enriched his narrative.

In Noah's case, his written product remained constant throughout the writing process—linear scribbles with occasional spaces and drawings that looked like an animal and a person. His responses during the plan and review steps offered Ms. Tomlinson insight into his composing process. The statements at these two points connected to each other and were linked to the written product, which included drawings of his Papa and dog, Boots. In addition, the number of his ideas increased as he wrote, his choice of ideas enhanced the quality of his narrative, and the new ideas expanded the story by providing key plot points to form a complete story arc. When asked to read his final product to Ms. Tomlinson, Noah included multiple story elements, such as phrases specific to the narrative genre ("Once upon a time . . . " and "The End") as well as some other elements (conflict and resolution, details around characters, and setting). Taken together, Noah demonstrated strong connection skills and robust discourse by sharing rich details and evidence of knowledge of story elements.

However, children often need scaffolding to connect the plan, write, and review steps. Children with lower levels of connection may need further support in understanding the writing process, including when they work on the kinds of long-term writing projects emphasized in many state early learning standards and in the Common Core State

Standards. These sustained writing projects are helpful to begin to understand the revision process as well. When children use the plan-write-review approach, they use a form of self-revision. By supporting children directly in the revision process, teachers can help children develop and engage more deeply in the skills and processes involved in writing.

Individualizing Strategies and Supports Based on Current Composition Skills

Because it can be challenging to engage in all three composition indicators simultaneously, teachers need to consider when certain teaching strategies and supports make the most sense. For example, a teacher may observe a child communicating fewer or simpler ideas in their writing (emerging levels of discourse skills). This young writer could benefit from the teacher increasing feedback at multiple points in the writing process and by increasing exposure to books and modeled writing with rich discourse.

However, lower discourse levels could also indicate that the child has advanced transcription skills; that is, the young writer may understand that what they plan to write must be produced on paper but feel constrained because they are aware of what they do (and do not) know about letter-sound correspondence and spelling patterns. In that case, the child would benefit from the teacher providing more structured supports such as word cards, mentor texts, and scaffolded prompts to lessen the burdens associated with transcription and to allow ideas to flow. Teachers can also support children in this stage by taking dictation so that they can present and refine ideas without worrying about the writing.

Conversely, children with higher levels of discourse (many robust ideas) may demonstrate this level of progression alongside slightly lower transcription and connection skills. Educators can support children composing in this way by continuing to encourage strong discourse and idea formation. For example, they can take dictation while a child describes their plan for writing or when the child reviews what they wrote. Having assessment information that captures these composition components helps teachers give more responsive instruction and support.



Assessing Three Composition Indicators: Transcription, Connection, and Discourse

For a more robust understanding of children's writing, teachers can look for and assess three distinct components of composition—transcription, connection, and discourse—to inform planning and instruction. Each can be analyzed independently, then interpreted together. (See "Individualizing Strategies and Supports Based on Current Composition Skills" above.) It is important to consider how these components might impact and interact with each other.

Assessing Transcription in the Context of Composing

Like Noah, many preschool-age children use drawing and scribbling when making early writing attempts. Observing these attempts can provide teachers with helpful directions for next steps, such as

- providing increased opportunities for interactive and modeled writing
- drawing attention to the differences between print and illustrations while reading books
- playing games that encourage children to notice and practice letters and letter sounds
- working on beginning letter formations

Other children may demonstrate slightly different approaches to writing, like using well-formed letters and/or letter-like shapes without a strong correspondence to letter sounds. Again, teachers can use this information to plan experiences that leverage current knowledge (conceptual understandings of letters) to support next steps. Teachers can give children in this stage opportunities to

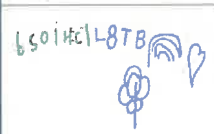
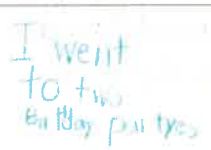
- practice and engage with letter-sound correspondence
- understand words as discrete units comprised of individual letters
- provide scaffolded writing experiences that support estimated spellings
- begin to introduce word spellings

We have included a table with examples of children's compositions. (See "Examples of Children's Transcription in Writing" below.) In addition to including children's products, we interpret the children's mark making in the "Description of Sample" column. Practitioners will want to engage in a similar form of assessment analysis. Some transcription indicators practitioners can assess include

- **scribbles and drawings:** recognizable and unrecognizable drawings; linear scribbles that resemble writing
- **letters and letter-like shapes:** recognizable letters (sometimes can be reversed or inverted); discrete forms that contain aspects of letters (curves, lines, etc.)
- **beginning estimated spelling:** writing a letter that is connected phonologically to a sound in the target word (writing *M* for medicine), accounting for one sound

- **advanced estimated spelling:** writing multiple letters that are connected phonologically to multiple sounds in the target word (writing *MD* for medicine), accounting for multiple sounds

Examples of Children's Transcription in Writing

Writing Context	Working in the art center	During journal time, writing about the weekend	Working in the literacy center on book making/story writing
Child's Sample			
	"There was a rainbow over the whole world."	"I went to two birthday parties."	"I wrote about a mouse."
Description of Sample	Uses a combination of drawings and letters Understands concepts of print, particularly linear left to right writing	Uses a mix of advanced estimated and conventional spellings Creates well-formed letters Uses spacing	Uses linear scribbling as writing Understands concepts of printing, particularly that marks on paper have meaning
Instructional Considerations	Focus on and support the child in making connections between letters and sounds to form words	Focus on and support the child in continuing to experiment with spelling, and draw attention to punctuation	Focus on and support the child in forming letters through practice and letter identification activities, and draw attention to spacing in writing

Assessing Connections Between Ideas

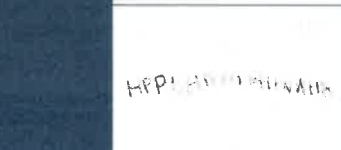
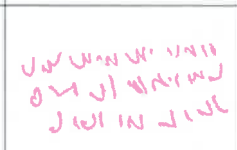
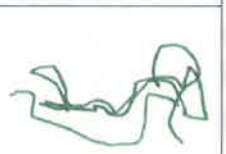
Moving beyond transcription is important for a fuller understanding of writing. To do this, practitioners should examine children's verbalizations in addition to their written products, including drawings. Asking children to plan, write, then review what they have written gives teachers a broader understanding of a child's ability to translate ideas into writing. By assessing the connection between children's planned writing, the actual writing, and the reviewed writing, teachers can gauge children's intentionality, how they are embarking on the writing process, and their ability to revise and transform their plans.

For example, during the plan step of writing, Noah told Ms. Tomlinson that he was going to write about his father taking his dog to the vet. When she followed up, he repeated his initial intention and elaborated with additional plot points and details. In this case, Noah's plan and product were highly connected. Another day, Noah indicated he wanted to write a story about basketball. However, when Ms. Tomlinson followed up with him, he reviewed his writing and indicated that he had written a story about a dragon and a knight who play basketball together. In this case, his story was rich and detailed but only partially connected to his plan.

Teachers can identify varying levels of connection in children's ideas across the plan-write-review process. Connection of ideas refers to semantic linkages (similarities in meaning), even when there are syntax changes (changes to the language used to convey that meaning). For example, if a child said they planned to write "let's go to the zoo" but instead wrote "animals at the zoo," their work still demonstrates connection because the main topic, the zoo, remains central to their writing. Likewise, key actors and details might change from the plan step to the review step, but if the theme and essence of the message are similar or remain the same, the child has exhibited connection in their work. As teachers assess for the connection indicator (see "Examples of Children's Connections in Writing" below), they may also encounter

- **disconnection:** limited or no connection between what the child plans to write, what they write, and what they say they wrote when reviewing their work
- **partial disconnection:** some linkages in ideas across the plan-write-review process, but not consistent; contains major transformations in ideas while retaining the general theme
- **connection:** clear linkages in ideas across the plan-write-review process

Examples of Children's Connections in Writing

Writing Context	During journal time, writing about the weekend	Working in the literacy center while reading books	During journal time, writing about recent important events
Child's Sample	**Plan:** "I am going to write about the bouncy castle at my cousin's birthday."	**Plan:** "I am writing about the book *Pocket for Corduroy*."	**Plan:** "I'm doing a story about trick or treating on Halloween."
			
	Review: "Happy birthday to you, that's the song we sang to my cousin."	**Review:** "It says, 'Corduroy got left in the laundry place, and he fell in the washer!'"	**Review:** "My brother got a bunkbed."
Description of Sample	Partial connections between planned and reviewed writing regarding birthday Reviewed writing is more connected to writing than planned writing (HP = happy)	Strong idea connections throughout the plan, write, and review steps While writing to what was planned, ideas were added	Ideas in plan step and review step are disconnected
Instructional Considerations	Focus on and support the child's in-the-moment planning and reviewing Connect between initial plan and the finished writing ("I remember that when you were planning, you mentioned a bouncy castle. Maybe you can write about that part next.")	Focus on and support the child to experiment with adding details to narrative elements during the plan step, like character and setting descriptions or a more complex plot Ask questions to support robust planning process ("That's a great book to write about. What parts do you want to focus on?")	Focus on and support the child by drawing attention to and modeling the writing process of plan-write-review in ways that are aligned and consistent Remind the child of their plan during and after writing

Assessing Discourse Through Idea Generation and Transformations

Because young children's writing is still developing in terms of conventions like spelling and punctuation, it can be difficult to read and understand. In the plan and review steps, children's verbalizations of ideas, or discourse, are critical to helping adults understand their thought processes above and beyond what can be gauged from their written products alone.

Discourse can be assessed in the plan step (when children provide information about what they plan to write) and in the review step (when children share what they have written). By assessing children's discourse, teachers gain insight into their ideas, creativity, thought processes, and understanding of writing purposes and contexts.

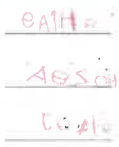
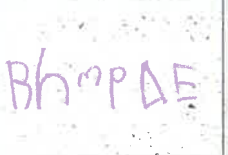
> *Asking children to plan, write, then review what they have written gives teachers a broader understanding of a child's ability to translate ideas into writing.*

In other contexts, discourse might look different but is still critical to understanding composition skills. For example, children in the dramatic play area might write lists or letters and demonstrate variability in the number of ideas represented or in the genre- or context-based elements, such as a salutation for a letter or a list structure for a list. Assessing discourse can give teachers information about children's knowledge of text types, genres, and structures to further support their writing development.

Educators can assess discourse (see "Examples of Children's Discourse in Writing" below) by observing and analyzing the following indicators:

- the relevance of the writing for the context
- the number, quality, and structure of ideas children provide
- how those ideas transform from the plan step to the review step

Examples of Children's Discourse in Writing

Writing Context	During journal time, writing about our families	Working in the literacy center on book making/story writing	Working in the art center
Child's Sample			
	"My grandma had a party. There was coconut cake. I like coconuts."	"Once there was a princess, and she ruled the whole kingdom. One day, she lost her pet dragon."	"I wrote, 'Barbie House and my Puppy'."
Description of Sample	Ideas adhere to a particular theme but are not fully developed or coherent	Ideas are coherent and aligned to context Ideas are well developed and connected to writing product	Ideas are developing but somewhat unclear and misaligned
Instructional Considerations	Focus on and provide support to the child around writing purposes and how to use writing in particular contexts	Focus on and provide support to the child by introducing different varieties of narrative genres and offering the child more options to experiment with these genres	Focus on and provide support to the child by drawing attention to common writing features that are specific to a particular genre (characters, events, settings, etc.)



Conclusion

Writing is foundational in early learning and warrants robust instruction and assessment to effectively support developing writers as they progress to kindergarten and beyond. We propose a framework that acknowledges the importance of transcription and written products while elevating children's voices and the writing process. After all, quality writing is more than neatly formed letters and conventional spelling. Composing is a fluid process, so early childhood educators may notice fluctuations in transcription, connection, and discourse in children's writing over time. However, regardless of what

children's writing looks like, they have important things to say. Teachers can capture, interpret, and leverage children's writing in ways that are comprehensive, engaging, and supportive to their overall literacy learning.

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