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## UNIT 3 ASSESSING WRITING ABILITY

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objective of the unit is to enable you to

- involve students in assessing their own written work
- provide effective feedback on student writing
- devise a marking code to help learners understand teacher feedback

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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You have already read in the first unit how writing/composing is considered both as a product as well as a process. In the classroom, a teacher has to focus first on the process and then on the product. While focusing on the process, the teacher provides maximum support in terms of helping students generate and organize ideas, articulate them and once the ideas are encoded in language, rethink, redraft and rewrite those parts which do not communicate the intent of the learner/writer. This is followed by the support provided in editing and proof reading the product, that is, the written piece of text. Next, the focus of the teacher needs to shift on the product, which is of equal importance because students are marked or given grades on what they write. The teacher should provide effective and constructive feedback on student writing so that they learn to express their intent communicatively. The teacher also needs to devise a marking system, which the students can understand, so that the feedback given by the teacher is easily comprehended by the students.

The teacher needs to keep in mind certain aspects of student writing before providing student feedback.

- 1) Writing is not a simple transition from the spoken to the written language. Students have to learn to make the switch from the colloquial to the acceptable standard variety, from the spontaneous use of language to planned language use, and from a known audience to an unknown reader. In India,

the transition becomes more difficult because students tend to translate literally structures and vocabulary from their mother tongue to the Target Language. Their language also includes Indianisms and certain cultural expressions.

- 2) Students do not learn features of the written language all at once or even at a particular stage. Like all other skills, the ability to write well develops slowly and gradually. Therefore, writing tasks of various complexities should be given to students to undertake.

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### 3.2 STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN ASSESSMENT

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Research studies reveal that when teachers involve students to diagnose problems in their own text and rectify them, they feel motivated to improve their own writing. Researchers like Brian Johnston (1987) recommends that, teachers should “encourage student involvement in arriving at assessments by teaching students self assessment, peer group assessment skills, to specify aspects of their work that they want responses to and teaching to negotiate assessments”. Tricia Hedge advocates students’ involvement in the designing of a grading scheme on the grounds that it raises students’ awareness of what makes a good piece of writing and “prevents misunderstanding about the role of grading in writing classrooms”. Let us look at some aspects of this:

- a) **Self Assessment** – When students develop a greater understanding of the writing process, it is a good strategy to give them time to read through their written work and diagnose the problems in what they have written. Constructive feedback should be given on what they have written and they should be asked to apply cognitive and affective strategies to develop the content and reader orientation of their writing. The ability to identify problems in their own text, will help them write effectively, with minimum errors.
- b) **Peer Comments**  
This is also another way of involving students in the assessment process. The writing could be commented upon by their peers, which could lead to further rewriting of the same task. Peer comments are usually suggestions not commands hence learners are at liberty to incorporate suggestions, which they feel are appropriate. This active interaction of learners with their peer texts will help them to expand their own ideas resulting in a greater vision of their own writing from different perspectives, which perhaps they may not have thought about. In addition, peer suggestions may also have underlying cultural connotations which may or may not appeal to the learners. This would also foster independent thinking because they would learn to choose and incorporate appropriate suggestions, which do not hurt the cultural sentiments of the readers. This is an extremely sensitive but an important issue because our classrooms are a microcosm of the larger pluri-cultural society, heterogeneous in character, having learners from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
- c) **Pair Work (Feedback) Editing** – Students can work in pairs, correcting and helping each other. They can write the first draft and exchange them with their partners for comments. In case of doubts or certain clarifications, they can seek the help of the teacher. However, teachers need to monitor

the feedback students give so that there is no negativity and leg pulling.

As pair work *editing* takes place immediately after writing, it makes it more useful and meaningful. Students learn to recognize errors in their written text and it also makes them think about clarity and acceptability of their writing.

- d) **Negotiating Assessment** - The teachers can prioritize the criteria for a feedback. They could also discuss it with the students so that assessment would be effective.

The following marking system has been adapted from Tricia Hedge’s “Resource Book for Teachers: Writing”. What do you think is most important in a composition? Can you place the various aspects in order of importance? (1-10)

Correct Grammar
Length
Originality of Ideas
Spelling & Neat Handwriting
Punctuation
Introduction
Good range of vocabulary
Well structured sentences
Good organisation
Body and conclusion suitable to the topic

*Tricia Hedge: Resource Book for Teachers: Writing 1988*

**Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) Developing which aspect of writing would you give importance to
  - at the primary level
  - at the secondary/higher secondary level
- 2) According to you, should writing tasks be given marks or should they be graded? State at least 2/3 reasons.

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- 3) What problems do you foresee in your classroom in involving students in the assessment process? How would you solve them?

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- 4) Devise tasks for your students to involve them in assessing their own written work.

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### 3.3 TEACHER CORRECTION OF WRITTEN WORK

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An issue that continues to remain at the forefront of developing writing skills in learners is teachers’ response to student writing. Marking compositions is the most widely used method of evaluating student writing. Teachers and researchers alike acknowledge that pronouncing judgment on a piece of L2 writing is very important, yet very difficult. Difficult because there is little agreement among teachers or researchers about how teachers should respond to student writing. Griffin (1982) noted that “the major question confronting any theory of responding to student writing is where we should focus our attention.” Today also, much of the conflict over teacher response is whether teacher feedback should focus on ‘form’ (grammar, mechanics) or ‘content’ (organization, amount of detail, cohesion, coherence etc). L2 research studies on teacher responses on student composition have focused both on form and content. In studies focusing on ‘form’ it was observed that providing the correct form did not have any significant effect on writing proficiency, while studies of Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986) found that showing location of errors improved accuracy. Students who received feedback did make more improvement on the writing task than those who did not receive feedback.

Zamel, (1985) examined the way the teachers provided feedback on ‘content’. She found that ESL teachers’ (Teachers teaching English as second language) comments on content were vague and contradictory. She observed that students responded to comments on form and ignored those on content because these lacked clarity. Therefore, it is very important for teachers to comment on the context by giving concrete ideas and suggestions; maybe by rewriting part of students’ writing.

Now let us turn our attention to the English teachers in India, and what they generally focus on while marking compositions. It is generally observed that teachers focus more on ‘form’ than on ‘content’. The general way of responding is by underlining spelling errors, wrong grammatical constructions and inappropriate use of lexis. Hardly any teacher, or very few teachers write comments in the margins for students to understand and incorporate. If teachers do not clearly and precisely write comments, then how are the learners going to interpret the red line? How would they know that the word is wrongly used, or whether it is a wrong grammatical construction or whether the question mark means that the meaning is unclear (Mujumdar, 2005). Therefore, it is very

important to devise a feedback system, which can be easily understood by the students. **But the primary question remains how should teachers respond to student writing?**

We have seen that writing is a cyclical process (Vanikar and Mujumdar 1995). Today, when communication of meaning is considered most important along with accuracy of form, it becomes extremely essential that teachers focus attention on both, the process as well as the product, that is, **form as well as content**.

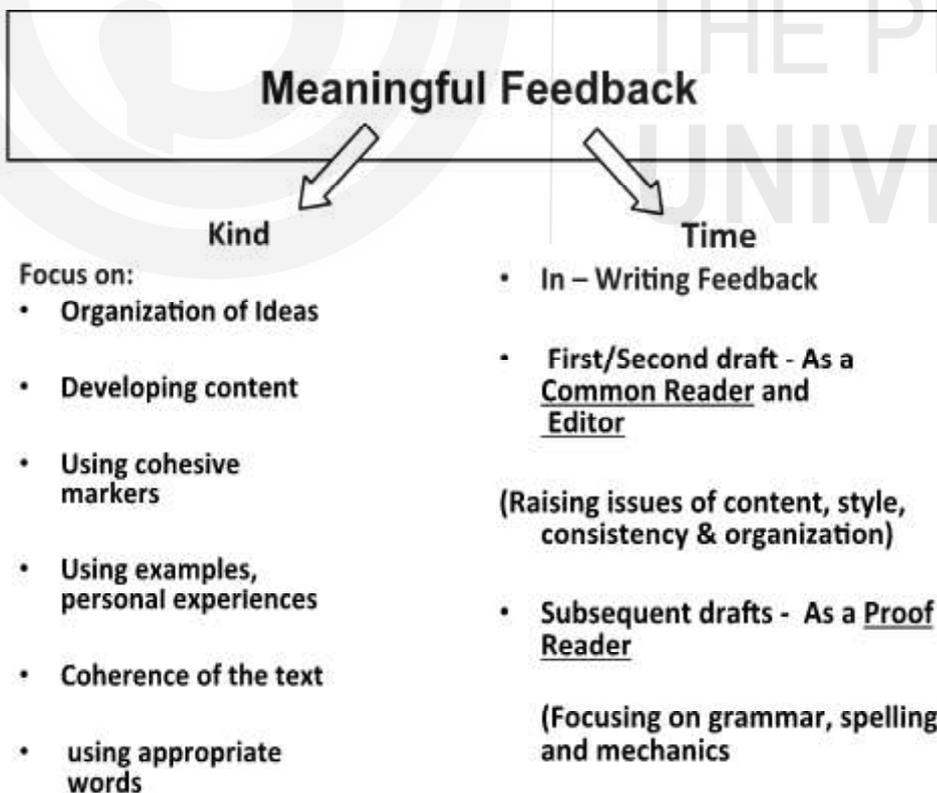
Researchers like Taylor (1981); Zamel (1987); Raimes (1985) have suggested that teachers should look at errors in the linguistic features **only after the ideas or the content of the task has been fully developed**. Keeping these trends in the frame of reference, it is important that teachers help learners, through their feedback, transform their “writer based structure” into a “reader based” one (Flower 1979). In order to make this transformation at first, it is important to undertake writing as a class room activity (in almost all schools and colleges it is given as home work) in which learners go through the process of multiple–drafting (Huff 1983), and then teachers should provide “meaningful feedback” on what the students have written.

### 3.3.1 Meaningful Feedback

What does ‘**meaningful feedback**’ mean? It means the

- kind/type of feedback provided on student writing, and
- time of feedback provided on student writing.

This is diagrammatically represented below:



Teachers, need to develop an appropriate and a timely response system depending upon the draft, which the child is writing. As Purves (1984) suggests, “the need is to train teachers to consciously adopt all kinds of roles, either in isolation or in combination, depending on the stage at which the writing is ready – one of the early drafts, a revision or the final product”. It means that the teacher should adopt the roles of a “common reader, proof-reader, editor, reviewer, gate keeper, critic, linguist /psychologist and diagnostic/ therapist” (ibid.’84: 261). **Teacher development lies in assuming and adopting each of these roles depending on the situation in which the writing is being produced.** Unconsciously, teachers tend to adopt the role of the proofreader or the editor at the beginning of the writing task, which may create a negative impact on many students and produce an apprehension about writing. It is important to adopt those roles, but preferably at the final stages of writing.

### 3.3.2 Kind/Type of Feedback

At the **first and second draft stage**, (Refer to the given diagram) teachers should adopt a role which is a **combination of a common reader and an editor. As a reader** issues of consistency, content, style and organization should be raised. At this stage, teachers should respond in terms of raising questions, seeking clarifications, reflecting on confusions in thought, noting places in the text where meaning is not clear, supporting the points with the help of examples. Comments made should point out to breaks in logic, disruptions in meaning, and missing information. The basic objective of commenting on these aspects in the early drafts is to engage students with issues, which they want to communicate and help them to clarify the purpose of their writing. Further, teachers need to prioritize their responses to the drafts and the subsequent rewrites. As **editors**, they can respond at locations where concern for audience is required because the role of an editor is to act as surrogates for common readers or reviewers. By responding in this manner they can develop a working relationship with the student. As editors, their judgments would usually be proximate, not final. Once this is achieved, in **later and in subsequent drafts**, the teacher should act as **proofreaders** and comment on language-based problems, which are also **equally important to communicate meaning effectively**. Participating in this meaning making activity would mean that teachers **no longer present themselves as authoritarians, judges or evaluators, but act as interested readers, guides, counselors, “consultants, assistants and facilitators”** (Zamel ’85:96). This collaborative relationship between the teacher and the student writing would go a long way in helping to negotiate “ways to bring actual effect (on the reader) as closely in line with the desired intention (of the writer) as possible” (Brannon and Knoblauch ’82: 162).

### 3.3.3 Timing of the Feedback

Equally important is the timing of the feedback. As mentioned earlier, it should not be offered to writers at the end of the writing activity; post correction feedback merely notes changes in the language items and at best helps learners to replace some words and phrases at discrete points in the text. **Feedback on student writing is best offered when learners are in the process of constructing and producing their text.** The input provided while the text is being written would allow writers to replace inadequate expressions with more appropriate ones, which would prove more effective in conveying their intended meaning. It would also engage students in producing language through rewrites as a consequence of self-evaluation and self-adjustment.

### 3.4 DEVISING A MARKING CODE

Students' confidence in exploration of ideas and the manner of presentation is best nurtured in a "helpful, non-threatening atmosphere, where experiments in language are not only acceptable but encouraged". Their writing work definitively needs to be marked but they should not get a copy marked with red ink with absolutely no inkling of what is amiss leaving no scope for self correction. It is important therefore to devise a marking system which students are aware of. Also detail commenting, though time consuming, at the end on their writing is especially beneficial to motivate students who like to monitor their own development. Both, commenting and devising a marking system is likely to have a lesser negative impact on their writing. The following is a marking system, which teachers can follow and also give it to the students for their reference:

agr	<i>agreement problem</i> : circle the word and state whether it is subject-verb, pronoun, antecedent etc.
art	<i>add an article</i> or change the article used
cap	<i>use capital letter</i>
no cap	<i>use small case</i>
?	<i>unclear</i> - either handwriting illegible or meaning unclear
^, del	something missing, add the omitted word/phrase, something more needs to be added
frag	<i>sentence fragment</i> . Add something to make the sentence complete
	<i>Indent</i> . Leave spaces at the beginning of the line
	<i>Join the sentence</i>
Neg	<i>negation</i> . Used incorrect form of negative. Change to correct form.
N.I.	<i>not idiomatic</i> . Use a more idiomatic word.
ns.	<i>Non standard usage</i> . Use a more formal expression.
#, n	<i>number problem</i> . Change to singular or plural as necessary
//	<i>begin a new paragraph</i>
no //	<i>no new paragraph</i> . Continue the sentence in the previous paragraph
prep	<i>Preposition</i> . Use a different preposition
pro	<i>Pronoun</i> . Use subjective or objective form as necessary
red	<i>redundant</i> . Repeated ideas / delete unnecessary sentences
p	<i>punctuation</i> – change/correct punctuation
RO	<i>Run – on – sentence</i> . Joined two clauses or sentences incorrectly. Separate them or add punctuation to join them.
sp	<i>spelling</i> . Check dictionary if necessary
t	<i>verb-tense</i> . Used wrong verb tense. Change to convey meaning
wc, wu	<i>word choice</i> . Incorrect word used. Change to convey meaning
wo	<i>word order</i> . Rearrange the words to be meaningful.

Source: *Teaching ESL Compositions Principles and Techniques*, Hughey, Wormouth et al, 1969.

This marking system is an example, which you can use. The teachers are at complete liberty to devise a new marking system, which your students can understand. Certain comments written in the margins could be something as given below:

- 1) Repetition
- 2) Show contrast
- 3) This would be better placed in the first paragraph
- 4) Use one paragraph to explain the definition/concept
- 5) You need a formal outline to organize your main points
- 6) Use a linker like *and, but therefore, though, etc.*
- 7) Extend paragraph 2
- 8) Add a concluding sentence
- 9) Rewrite the introductory paragraph keeping the topic in mind.
- 10) Correct the number problems
- 11) Improve organization of points.
- 12) Add specific details to support the point

Such comments can help learners rectify their own mistakes.

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### **3.5 SOME METHODS OF EVALUATING WRITING**

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Writing can be evaluated in a variety of ways. Among the techniques most widely used are the **holistic method**, the **analytic method**, and the **single focus method**. Each method has its own advantages.

**Holistic evaluation:** This method is based on the premise that writing is an integrated process; therefore its parts can be evaluated in relation to the whole. This method evaluates writing comprehensively by gauging the overall quality or general impression that a piece of writing makes on a reader. Many teachers find that the holistic method allows them to evaluate a piece of writing without getting lost in the particulars of spelling, usage and mechanics.

One of the benefits of the holistic technique is its efficiency. By allowing teachers to evaluate the thoughts expressed in a piece of writing without getting lost in particulars, this method saves time. Writing samples can be read quickly and ranked on a three point or five point scale. While this method does not evaluate individual language needs, it is a good method for assessing the overall language demands of the class as a whole.

A set of holistic scoring criteria arranged on a five point scale is given below. The writing descriptions are generic and therefore applicable to any kind of writing. Teachers can however modify it to suit a specific type of writing or adapt it to the needs of their students.

## A HOLISTIC EVALUATION GUIDE

### SCORE WRITING DESCRIPTION

- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 4) | Writing is consistent and coherent<br>Includes a clear sense of order<br>Elaborates on a main idea<br>Uses original and specific details<br>Provides a clear conclusion<br>Uses vocabulary appropriately and effectively |
| 3) | Writing is consistent with stimulus<br>Uses elaboration though some gaps appear<br>Includes specific examples or details<br>Uses varied vocabulary   |
| 2) | Writes bare essentials with little or no details<br>Writing rambles and goes off topic frequently<br>Writing contains gaps that confuse the readers<br>Incorrect vocabulary  |
| 1) | Restates writing prompt<br>Writing is confusing or lacks coherence<br>Lists objects in picture<br>Uses vocabulary poorly   |
| 0) | Uses illegible handwriting<br>Does not respond to required writing task<br>Does not complete assignment  |

(Source: *World of language. Grade 4. TEST TEACHER MANUAL.* Silver Burdett and Ginn Inc. 1990)

On the basis of the above evaluation, the teacher could write a summary indicating the strengths of the writing, as well as, the areas requiring improvement.

**Analytic evaluation:** This method involves the isolation of specific traits or aspects of writing, such as, organisation, word choice, usage, and mechanics. The teacher then evaluates the writing sample several times – once for each trait on a scale ranging from low to high. The analytic method helps the teacher to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. However, since it is very time consuming, teachers would perhaps need to modify it to suit the requirements and constraints of a large class.

## AN ANALYTICAL EVALUATION GUIDE

Low    Average    Above Average    High

- Content
- Organisation
- Development
- Word choice
- Style
- Sentence structure usage
- Mechanics
- Spelling
- Legibility

(Source: *World of language. Grade 4.* TEACHER TEST MANUAL. Silver Burdett and Ginn Inc, 1990).

**Single focus evaluation:** This method involves the review of a piece of writing to determine the extent to which it exhibits a specific characteristic or trait. In general, this approach is most useful when students are asked to write for a specific purpose. Evaluation is then based on the extent to which the writing fulfils its purpose. This method may also be used to evaluate other aspects of writing such as spelling or sentence structure. This method uses the same numerical scale as the holistic method, with the criteria for each score related to a specific trait. It is useful for teachers to develop their own criteria depending on the specific focus.

### Check Your Progress 2

Make a criteria sheet on developing a main idea in a paragraph.

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### Conclusion

In conclusion, as teachers, we need to respond to their writing in such a way that the learners do not consider writing drafts a “laborious process”. Instead, they should view writing in terms of responding to the feedback and restructuring ideas. This is particularly important for ESL students because as English is a learnt language, it is possible that they may have limited vocabulary, incomplete mastery of grammatical structures or they may use incorrect mechanical devices. Teachers, while responding, should take into consideration the language resources of the learners. The cultural meanings that manifest in their writing should not be ignored. Teacher responses therefore, should help them to look beyond lexical level concerns towards global concerns so that they can make the transition from

the “writer based structure” (mental mode) to a “reader oriented one” (Flower 1979).

### Check Your Progress 3

The following is a report written by students on “The Children’s Day” celebrations in Chhatrasaal Stadium. Devise your own marking scheme based on the given report.

Delhi: 14 November. HT Corr: Yesterday, the day of childrens the 14<sup>th</sup> nov was celebrated with great pomp and show at Chhatrasaal Stadium at 4 p.m. The Chief guest was chief minister Arvind Kejariwal. The childrens looked like flowers in their dresses of different colours. The fancy dress competition was held. The prizes were distributed to the winners. A dance programme was organized by std. XI students. The small children of II class showed ribbon drill. After this, sweets were distributed among the children. At 6 p.m. the occasion ended. The children went to their homes with their parents. The school staff came to see off the chief guest.

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## 3.6 LET US SUM UP

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These are some of the points that were discussed in the unit:

- As teachers, we have to play several roles – guide, facilitator, counselor, editor, proofreader
- Students feel motivated and involved if they understand the basis on which marks are awarded.
- Students should be involved in the assessment procedure in informal/classroom situations.
- A marking pattern coupled with detailed comments motivate students to develop their writing.
- Holistic and analytical scheme of marking have their own advantages and disadvantages.
- In-writing feedback should be provided to students.
- Teachers should decide on the kind of feedback to be provided to students.
- Teachers should provide feedback while students are developing content of their writing.

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## 3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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### 3.8 ANSWERS

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#### Check Your Progress – 1

- 1) Primary level- mechanics of writing needs to be developed: handwriting, punctuation, spelling, grammar  
Secondary Level – originality of ideas, cohesion, coherence, range of vocabulary, syntactic structures

- 2) Judicious use of marks and grades – low grades and low marks demotivate students. Grades may not be interpreted correctly by students, hence sometimes giving marks helps.
- 3) Interpersonal rivalry and group dynamics to be taken into account. Pairs need to be changed frequently - feedback should be constructive. Teachers should monitor feedback given by students
- 4) Tasks can be devised in the areas learners encounter difficulty. You can refer to the preparation of tasks in the Unit on The Writing Process and Different Types of Writing.

### Check Your Progress 2

A criteria sheet for assessing a paragraph with special focus on the main idea is given below:

#### SCORE CRITERIA

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• there is a clear topic sentence.</li> <li>• each of the other sentences expands on or clarifies the main idea.</li> <li>• uses specific and clear details relevant to the topic.</li> <li>• the student addresses the main idea with understanding by showing a logical progression and using suitable connectors.</li> <li>• there is a definite and logical conclusion which may include a summing up of the main points.</li> </ul> |
| 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• there is a clear topic sentence</li> <li>• each of the other sentences expands on the main idea, however there are some irrelevant details.</li> <li>• uses details to expand on or support the main idea.</li> <li>• there is a logical progression, however there are some gaps.</li> <li>• there is a conclusion.</li> </ul>  |
| 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• there is a topic sentence, but it does not clearly address the topic.</li> <li>• some sentences wander off into inappropriate subjects.</li> <li>• there is a minimal amount of description or detail.</li> <li>• there are a number of gaps, the transitions between actions or ideas are not clearly expressed, therefore the writing does not progress logically.</li> <li>• there is no conclusion.</li> </ul>                     |
| 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the student rephrases or directly repeats the verbal stimulus.</li> <li>• the sentences are confusing, they address the topic in a disorganised and disconnected way.</li> <li>• details are irrelevant</li> <li>• there is no logical progression.</li> <li>• there is no conclusion.</li> </ul>  |
| 0 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the student's handwriting is so poor that it is impossible to determine if the topic was addressed.</li> </ul>   |

- the writing is completely off the topic.
- the paper is blank or has some meaningless scribbles.

### Check Your Progress 3

Open ended answer.

