INSIGHTS FOR TEACHERS

NMSSA English 2019
WRITING FOR AN AUDIENCE
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**NMSSA Report 22-IN-4: Insights for Teachers 4. NMSSA English 2019 – Writing for an Audience**

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The purpose of this report

This report is designed to support the teaching of English in primary and intermediate classrooms. It draws on insights generated from the assessment of the English learning area by the National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA) in 2019. The report focuses on writing for different purposes within the creating meaning strand of the English learning area.

This is the final report in a series of four, based on the English assessment findings. The full set of reports includes:


These reports will be useful to teachers and curriculum designers working with the English learning area of the New Zealand Curriculum.

Report 4 is organised into two parts. Part 1 briefly introduces NMSSA and the NMSSA assessment of English. Part 2 describes NMSSA assessment of writing, and insights about why students need support to consider the needs of their audience.
PART 1: The NMSSA English Assessment

What is NMSSA?

The National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA) is designed to assess student achievement across the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) (Ministry of Education, 2007) at Year 4 and Year 8 in New Zealand English-medium state and state-integrated schools. Each year, nationally representative samples of students from 100 schools at each of these two year levels are assessed in one or more learning areas. Components of the English learning area were assessed in 2012 (writing), 2014 (reading), and 2015 (listening and viewing). English was assessed as a single learning area in 2019.

The 2019 NMSSA English assessment

To assess the English learning area in 2019, the NMSSA project team developed a multi-part assessment focused on the two English strands, creating meaning and making meaning. The assessments included multi-choice and short answer questions, extended response items, one-to-one interviews, and individual and paired performance tasks.

Central to the study of English are literary texts (fiction and creative non-fiction) which use language in aesthetic, imaginative and engaging ways to entertain, engender emotion, express identity and invite reflection. The NMSSA study focused on student interpretation and creation of written, oral and visual language ‘literary’ texts. This included interpretation of extracts of fiction texts (such as novels, short stories, plays, poems, picture books) presented in different forms (print, audio, static image, film) and creation of written, spoken and visual texts with an emphasis on purpose and audience.

An assessment framework encompassing the indicators from the English learning area in the NZC provided a guide for the development of the tasks, see Table 1.1 on the following page.
Table 1.1: Constructs for the making-meaning and creating-meaning strands for assessing the English learning area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Making meaning</th>
<th>Creating meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading • Listening • Viewing</td>
<td>Writing • Speaking • Presenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locate and recall*</td>
<td>Can identify the information, ideas and features of print, oral and visual texts.</td>
<td>Can convey ideas and information through print, oral and visual texts for a range of purposes and audiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpret*</td>
<td>Can interpret print, oral, and visual texts by integrating text features and ideas, considering the relationship between ideas and text features, and by making inferences.</td>
<td>Express ideas with detail and colour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critically analyse*</td>
<td>Can critically analyse print, oral and visual texts by questioning texts rather than taking them at face value. This involves considering the construction of texts; questions of inclusion, exclusion and representation; and the ways in which texts can position a reader.</td>
<td>Critically analyse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can analyse their own processes and impact of presentations, questioning the features used, and evaluating their effectiveness. Can make deliberate choices of text structure, register and tone and use specific oral, visual or written language features to position the reader, viewer or listener.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These constructs were adapted (in a minor way) from the constructs used in Cycle 1 English assessments
PART 2 : NMSSA Writing

The NMSSA writing assessment
To assess writing as part of the English learning area in 2019, students were asked to write to one of five prompts for up to 40 minutes. Each prompt involved a different purpose for writing: to recount, to narrate, to explain, to describe, or to persuade. The writing was marked using the e-asTTle writing rubric. The e-asTTle rubric focuses on seven elements of writing: ideas, structure and language features, organisation, vocabulary, sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling.

Examples of the NMSSA writing prompts are shown in Figure 2.1 on the following page.
A special person

Think about the people who are special to you. Choose one of these people. Write to explain to your reader why this person is special.

Think about:
- what your reader needs to know about the special person
- how you are going to begin and end your piece of writing
- the order of your ideas and how you link them.

Remember to:
- choose your words carefully
- take care with your spelling, punctuation, and sentences
- edit – add or delete words or sentences to improve your writing.

Books are more important than computers

What do you think?
Write to persuade your reader of your ideas.

Think about:
- what your reader needs to know about the topic
- how you are going to begin and end your piece of writing
- how to add detail to your ideas
- the order of your ideas and how you link them.

Remember to:
- choose your words carefully
- take care with your spelling, punctuation, and sentences
- edit – add or delete words or sentences to improve your writing.

The best time I ever had

Think of the best time you ever had. Write to recount that time.

Think about:
- what you did, when and where you did it, and who was with you
- how you felt and why you felt that way
- how you are going to begin and end your piece of writing
- how to add detail to your ideas
- the order of your ideas and how you link them.

Remember to:
- choose your words carefully
- take care with your spelling, punctuation, and sentences
- edit – add or delete words or sentences to improve your writing.

Me

Describe what you look like in detail so that a visitor to your class would be able to pick you out from your classmates.

Think about:
- what your visitor needs to know about what you look like: your face, your hair, your shape and size, and what you’re wearing
- how to add detail to your ideas
- how you are going to begin and end your piece of writing
- the order of your ideas and how you link them.

Remember to:
- choose your words carefully
- take care with your spelling, punctuation, and sentences
- edit – add or delete words or sentences to improve your writing.

Wanting something

Write to narrate (tell) a story in which one of the characters really wants something but can’t have it.

Think about:
- where your story is set
- who your characters are – what they do, what they say, and how they think and feel
- how to begin your piece of writing
- the problem and how it is resolved (happily or not)
- how to add detail to your ideas
- the order of your ideas and how they are linked.

Remember to:
- choose your words carefully
- take care with your spelling, punctuation, and sentences
- edit – add or delete words or sentences to improve your writing.

Figure 2.1: Writing tasks from NMSSA 2019
Students' writing in this band typically shows:
- Ideas that are complex and deliberately selected, showing insight and reflection on the wider world.
- Structural and language features appropriate to purpose that are developed and controlled.
- Paragraphs that support the development of ideas at the paragraph and whole text level. They may be structured to direct the reader.
- Precise vocabulary that is deliberately chosen to enhance meaning.
- Correct sentence structures that are deliberately crafted to engage.
- A wide range of punctuation used correctly to assist meaning.
- High frequency and an increasing range of difficult words that are spelt correctly.

Students' writing in this band typically shows:
- Ideas that show some complexity and elaboration.
- Structural and language features appropriate to purpose showing some development and control.
- A coherent text; ideas flow; basic paragraphs.
- A variety of precise vocabulary that adds information and, increasingly, enhances meaning.
- Correct structures for most sentences; sentences show variety and extension; sense of control may be evident.
- Sentences that have beginning and end punctuation; may be correct use of other punctuation.
- Correct spelling for a wide range of high frequency words; approximations of difficult words.

Students' writing in this band typically shows:
- Many simple, unelaborated ideas or one idea with basic elaboration.
- Some structural and most language features appropriate to purpose.
- A coherent text that may be brief; ideas flow.
- Vocabulary that may include a small number of precise words.
- Sentences with correct structures that begin to show variety.
- An increasing control of beginning and end sentence punctuation.
- Correct spelling for a range of personal and high frequency words.

Students' writing in this band typically shows:
- Simple, unelaborated ideas.
- Structural and language features that are inappropriate or minimally appropriate to purpose.
- Text that may have some coherence; ideas may begin to flow.
- Vocabulary that is simple and personal.
- Sentences with correct structures that are short.
- Random or experimental punctuation.
- Letters used to represent meaning; a small number of personal and high frequency words may be spelt correctly.
The NMSSA writing scale
NMSSA used student responses to the writing assessment to construct a measurement scale—the Writing in the English Learning Area (WELA) scale. This was linked to the scale used in Cycle 1 (2012), allowing change over time to be examined. Figure 2.2 shows the WELA scale. The descriptions show the kinds of skills and knowledge associated with the different parts of the scale and reflect the focus areas of the e-asTTle writing rubric. The descriptions show how students’ skills and knowledge increase in sophistication as the scale score increases. They also outline what students typically know and can do when they score in each part of the scale.

How did students do on the writing assessment?
Figure 2.3 shows how students achieved on the 2019 NMSSA writing assessment.

The study found that over half (63 percent) of students in Year 4 were achieving at or above curriculum expectations (Level 2), while in Year 8 a minority (35 percent) of students were achieving at or above curriculum expectations (Level 4).

The study also found that for Year 4 students there was a small statistically significant decrease in the average English writing score from 2012 to 2019 (2 scale score units). For Year 8 students, the change in the average score was not statistically significant.

The following section presents an insight into students’ learning about writing, based on Year 4 and Year 8 responses to the writing task in the NMSSA English assessment.
Why is audience important?

All writing, with the possible exception of some forms of personal writing such as journaling, is designed to be read by someone. We write in order to communicate ideas or information to our readers. To communicate these ideas or information effectively, we need to have our readers in mind as we plan, draft, revise and refine our writing.

Audience works alongside topic (what you are writing about) and purpose (why you are writing) to guide your choice of content, text structure and organisation, and language features. For example, for the NMSSA writing prompt Me (see Figure 2.1) the topic is yourself, as the writer; the purpose is to describe yourself in detail so that a visitor would be able to pick you out from your classmates; and the audience is a visitor to the class who does not know you. Keeping these three elements in mind as you plan, draft, edit and refine your writing will help ensure that it is effective in conveying your intended message.

Identifying your audience is important because it affects the choices you make as you create your text. It is possible to write a text that covers the topic and matches the intended purpose but does not meet the needs of the reader. For example, if I was writing to explain (purpose) why I had not completed an important assignment (topic), I would probably write differently to my best friend than if I was writing to my principal. Besides my choice of register (degree of formality), I would also make different choices about which ideas I included and in what order, the level of detail, the vocabulary I used, the kinds of language and sentence structures I included, and so on. In another example, if I was writing to explain why I like computer gaming, I would write differently for someone who shared my interest and knew a lot about gaming than if I was writing for someone without this knowledge.

What does the curriculum say about audience?

The curriculum documents tend to group purpose and audience together. For example, the English achievement objectives of The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007)1 specify that students should develop their knowledge of how to shape texts for different purposes and audiences through choice of content, language, and text form, and the use of personal voice where appropriate. In addition, at curriculum levels 1 and 2, students should be developing the expectation that the texts they create will be ‘understood, responded to, and appreciated by others’.

The Literacy Learning Progressions expectations for writing provide greater definition between audience and purpose (Ministry of Education, 2010)2. The statements for ‘after 3 years at school’ and ‘by the end of Year 4’ specify that, where appropriate, students should demonstrate ‘an awareness of their audience through appropriate choice of content, language, and text form’. By the end of Year 8, however, purpose and audience are considered together, with language features being the main way of ‘engaging the audience’.

In the Learning Progressions Framework for Writing, audience is covered in the aspects Creating texts for literary purposes and Creating texts to influence others (Ministry of Education, 2019).3 The focus is on the use of language features to engage the reader and convey the writer’s intended message accurately and coherently when writing literary and persuasive texts. There is less emphasis on and direction about how to demonstrate awareness of audience when writing informational or subject-specific texts.

What did the NMSSA writing tasks say about audience?

The NMSSA writing task was presented to the students in the form of a booklet. The booklet had instructions about the task, a blank box for planning, and several blank pages for the writing. The teacher assessor (TA) administering the assessment read the task and instructions out loud to the students. The TA then had up to 5 minutes to discuss anything the students were unsure of. After that, students had 40 minutes to complete their writing. Table 1.2 below shows the title of each prompt and the directions for the student.

Only one of the tasks (Me) specified a particular audience for the writing (a visitor to the class). For the other tasks, students needed to infer who the reader might be (for example, peers, family, or a teacher).

From the completed NMSSA writing tasks, we noticed that students varied in their ability to consider the needs of their reader and to write effectively for an audience. There are opportunities for improvement in this area.

Table 1.2: Titles and directions for the writing tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Books are more important than computers</th>
<th>A special person</th>
<th>Me</th>
<th>Wanting something</th>
<th>The best time I ever had</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you think?</td>
<td>Think about the people who are special to you. Choose one of these people. Write to explain to your reader why this person is special.</td>
<td><strong>Describe</strong> what you look like in detail so that a visitor to your class would be able to pick you out from your classmates.</td>
<td>Write to <strong>narrate</strong> (tell) a story in which one of the characters really wants something but can't have it.</td>
<td>Think of the best time you ever had. Write to <strong>recount</strong> that time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How did students demonstrate awareness of their audience when writing?

We analysed a sample of 450 responses to the writing task to see how students showed awareness of audience through their choice of content, structure and language. The responses were drawn from across the five writing tasks and represented ‘high’, ‘medium’, and ‘low’ levels of achievement in writing for each year group. The three elements—choice of content, structure and language—are discussed below with examples taken from student writing in response to the five writing tasks.

Selecting relevant ideas
Most students at Year 4 and Year 8 were able to select ideas that were relevant to the topic. A small percentage of students at both year levels (12 percent at Year 4 and 5 percent at Year 8) did not include any ideas relevant to the topic, or included only one brief, simple idea. These students either wrote about a different topic or did not address the topic specified in the task instructions. For example, one student wrote a story about a magic tree rather than a story about someone who wanted something but could not have it. A student writing about *Books are more important than computers* wrote about why people should not kill animals.

Providing detail
Students varied in their ability to choose content and supporting detail that would help their reader learn about the topic in the way specified in the task instructions. For example, for the task *Me*, many students wrote about details that would not help the reader to distinguish them from the other students in the class, such as likes and dislikes or school uniform.

There were many responses in which students assumed their reader would share background knowledge with them. This led to ‘gaps’ in the writing: the reader had to work hard to fill in the missing information. For example, in the task *Books are more important than computers*, some students listed characteristics of either books or computers without saying whether these characteristics were positive or negative. The reader had to infer the writer’s meaning.

Table 1.3 on the following page shows the range of student writing for each prompt, from low to high levels of supporting detail. The sections in italics are extracts or examples from student writing that exemplify the level of detail.
## Table 1.3: Range of student writing for each prompt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Task</th>
<th>Low level of supporting detail</th>
<th>High level of supporting detail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Me**       | Details that focused on non-distinguishing attributes, for example school uniform, likes and dislikes, and/or friends.  
  - *I have tow eye. One Mouth.* (Y4)  
  - *I like to colour. I like to write and draw.* (Y4)  
  - *In my family I have got four siblings, 3 brothers and 1 sister.* (Y8)  
  - *I have 2 eyes, 1 nose, 2 ears and one mouth, of course. 5 fingers on each hand.* (Y4) | Details that focused on distinguishing characteristics such as distinctive clothing or physical attributes.  
  - *I am wearing a mint t-shirt with a silver question mark on the front.* (Y4)  
  - *The most recognisable feature about me is my dark, orange hair and hazel eyes.* (Y8) |
| **A special person** | Writing that identified a special person and gave some information about them, but did not include examples to show the reader why that person was special to the writer.  
  - *Lisyanna’s favourite colour is purple.* (Y4)  
  - *My mum is nice she is cool.* (Y4) | Writing that identified a special person and clearly explained to the reader why that person was special, through use of examples and supporting details.  
  - *The reason Amma is my special person is because she has the nicest personality that is kind caring and loving … she is a volunteer at the Art Gallery.* (Y4)  
  - *My special someone is my dad … another reason why he’s special is that he always makes time for me even when he’s busy.* (Y8) |
| **Wanting something** | Narratives that did not provide information or details to help the reader understand who it was that wanted something, why they wanted it, and/or why they could not have it.  
  - *Example: The student states that they want a pet and writes a story about what the pet will do (make lots of money and make the family rich).* (Y4)  
  - *Example: A short piece of writing about two characters who crash-land a spaceship.* (Y8) | Narratives in which the reader was able to identify which character wanted something, what they wanted, and why they could not have it.  
  - *Example: A simple recount of an event where a homeless man asked for money for chocolate and the writer’s mum said no – but offered to buy healthy food for him instead.* (Y4)  
  - *Example: a story where the central character is on the run. She has had a long journey in hot weather and desperately needs water. She is repeatedly denied water by the cold-hearted people she meets. Eventually she meets an old friend who looks after her.* (Y8) |
| **Books are more important than computers** | The writer’s opinion about the merits of books versus computers was not clear to the reader and/or did not provide supporting detail or examples to back up their point of view.  
  - *You can take books were ever you like (writer’s opinion about books v computers not clear).* (Y4)  
  - *Reading is better than computers because computers can sometimes be bad for you Well not sometimes ALL THE TIME!!!! (No supporting detail).* (Y4)  
  - *On computers there’s heaps of things that you can do, like school work, activities, games and also Homework.* (No details provided about books – only the good points of computers. Writer’s argument is not clear to the reader).* (Y8) | The writer’s point of view was clear and there were relevant details and examples to support this argument.  
  - *Computers ar more important than books because … computers hold gams and book dont.* (Y4)  
  - *Book are important because if you read books you will get smart and learnintristing stuff about animals and contrys. If you go on computers … it will just make you play games and watch you tube.* (Y4) |
| **The best time I ever had** | Writing focused on an event but did not include information or details to show the reader what happened and why that time was special.  
  - *Latley I hav ben driving my kc car up the bike trails. towin a trailer is a lot harder a sesley in thick mud.* (No details to show why this activity is a special time for the writer, what happens, and how the writer feels.)* (Y4)  
  - *When I was on a dirt bike Rideing along on it going fast falling off it.* (Y8) | Writing that included details which clearly showed the reader why the event was special.  
  - *My Best day was my birthday. I got new gumboots a scooter Hot Wheels and got to go shopping.* (Y4)  
  - *Example: a recount of a family gathering that provides details of how the day unfolded, how the writer felt, and what made the day so special.* (Y8) |
Structure: Writers choose a text structure and organisation that will help their audience follow their ideas

Students needed to think about how to organise their writing in a way that would communicate their ideas clearly to their reader. This involved making decisions about the text structure and providing links throughout the writing to help the reader understand how the ideas were connected. From our analysis of student writing, we found that students varied in their ability to introduce their topic to their reader, and in how well they could link their ideas coherently for their reader.

Choosing a text structure: introduction and orientating statement

Across the writing tasks, many students launched straight into their writing without providing any introduction or orienting statement for the reader. This made it harder for the reader to make sense of the text. For example, for the task, *A special person*, some students began their writing with a name (‘Mum’) or used an opening statement such as ‘I chose my mum’. In these cases, the reader had to work hard to understand that the writing was about someone who is special to the writer. Others were able to introduce their writing in simple but effective ways with an orienting statement:

A few students were able to go beyond a simple introduction based on the title of the task and write in a way that deliberately engaged the reader through an interesting ‘hook’. These students were more likely to be in Year 8.

Examples of student responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My mum is special because ...</td>
<td>Y4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In my opinion, books are better than computers ...</td>
<td>Y4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi my name is Freiya and I’m going to teach you a little about me ...</td>
<td>Y4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The best time I ever had was when ...</td>
<td>Y4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once upon a time ...</td>
<td>Y4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some people call it the ‘old school way’: using a book or similar resource instead of computers. I do agree that books are more beneficial in many ways.</td>
<td>Y4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was cold, it was dark. It was a night that the little town of Dukesborough would remember.</td>
<td>Y4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a person who you would do anything for? Well, I do.</td>
<td>Y8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You walk into a class full of children, you are trying to find me but you don’t know what to look for. Here are some clues.</td>
<td>Y4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paddling out, into the deep, raging sea, I had no control over my movement.</td>
<td>Y4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Providing clear links between ideas

Students needed to organise their ideas logically and provide clear links between them so the reader could see how they were connected. Clear organisation and links contribute to coherent writing that is easy for a reader to follow.

Student responses to the writing tasks showed that some students had trouble grouping their ideas (for example, when describing themselves, the details were scattered through the writing). In contrast, other students described their clothing, physical attributes, and characteristics in turn, grouping them in a way that made it easier for the reader to build a picture. Students also varied in their ability to provide links across the writing that would help the reader follow the writer’s train of thought. Patterns of student writing across the writing tasks are described in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4: Clarity of organisation and links across student writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Unclear organisation and links</th>
<th>Clear organisation and links</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Details about likes, dislikes, appearance, clothing scattered randomly across the writing.</td>
<td>Similar details grouped together—for example, details about the student’s body (hair, eyes, height etc), clothing (shoes, jersey, t-shirt etc), and other characteristics are grouped separately and/or paragraphed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A special person</td>
<td>Characteristics of the special person were scattered randomly through the writing.</td>
<td>A series of reasons why the person is special were clearly introduced. Connecting and ‘signpost’ words such as ‘because’, ‘first’, ‘secondly’, ‘lastly’, ‘next’, ‘also’, etc. were used to help the reader make connections between the writer’s ideas across the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting something</td>
<td>Sequence of events was hard to follow and/or tense varied across the writing.</td>
<td>It was clear how the story unfolded and there was appropriate and consistent use of tense. The sequence of events was easy to follow through use of time words like ‘afterwards’, ‘the next day’, ‘then’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books are more important than computers</td>
<td>Points about books and/or computers appeared randomly through the writing.</td>
<td>Points supporting the writer’s opinion were introduced clearly and logically. Connecting and ‘signpost’ words such as ‘because’, ‘first’, ‘secondly’, ‘lastly’ etc. were used to help the reader follow the writer’s argument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The best time I ever had</td>
<td>Perspective varied between first, second and third person. Sequence of events was hard to follow and/or changed from past to present.</td>
<td>It was clear how the event unfolded. Past tense was used consistently, and the sequence of events was easy to follow through use of time words like ‘in the morning’, ‘afterwards’, ‘then’, ‘next’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Language: Writers choose vocabulary and other language features that are appropriate for their audience

Students needed to think about their reader when choosing the vocabulary and language features to use in their writing. This included decisions about appropriate vocabulary and register, and the use of language to engage the reader and maintain interest.

Matching vocabulary to the needs of the reader

Students needed to think about the kinds of vocabulary that would best meet the needs of their reader. For example, for the task *Books are more important than computers*, many students chose an appropriate informal tone that created a connection with their reader.

Students varied in their ability to use the level of precision in vocabulary that would meet the needs of their readers. This was particularly apparent in the writing task *Me*. Students needed to use precise vocabulary that would describe their appearance in detail so that a visitor could pick them out from their classmates. Students varied in their ability to do this. Some students used general terms that did not give the visitor much detail:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of student responses.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have cool shoes</td>
<td>Y4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My face look good</td>
<td>Y8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other students used precise vocabulary that enabled the reader to build a vivid mental image of the writer:

Examples of student responses.

- I've got black glossy hair and silver heart earrings and they shine like glitter reflecting sunlight ... you might see me wearing a white cardigan with flowers and butterflies on the back and front

Examples of student responses.

- I have black, bushy hair that can vary from a number 2, to the size of a porcupine’s back. My glasses are black-rimmed ones. They are circular, and I am joked around by others sometimes that I look like Harry Potter
Using language features to engage and maintain interest

Students varied in their ability to use specific language features to engage their reader and to maintain the reader's interest in the topic. For example, for the task *Books are more important than computers*, some students wrote a text that covered the topic and achieved the purpose of explaining a point of view but was simple and repetitive.

Others were able to use language features such as rhetorical questions (e.g., last quote below), use of the second person point of view ('you'), and direct address to the reader (e.g., second quote below) that created and maintained interest. Use of these features also helped the reader develop a sense of the writer’s identity or personal voice.

**Examples of student responses.**

Books are much more important than computers. Because if you go on your computer too much you could get bad eye’s or get glasses like me.  

Wow! This book has so much information! I love books, they are a work of art … if you don’t like the book you’re reading, put it down and find a book that suites you better.

So maybe you have your computer and don’t like books I mean we all have different opinions but while you’re on your computer just know that I’ll probably be reading my book.

Now I don’t think you can rip a computer or break it as easily as a book, can you?
Examples of students' writing
The examples on the following pages show a selection of student writing, with annotations on the choice of content, structure and language appropriate to the audience.
Example 1: *The best time I ever had*. Year 8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas and information that are relevant for audience</th>
<th>The writer has chosen ideas that are relevant to the topic of a ‘best time’—jumping into the river on a hot, sunny day. Some details imply that this was a great day for the writer (e.g., ‘cold, crystal clear water, just waiting to be jumped into’). However, there are also gaps where the reader needs to infer meaning*, for example, that stepping off the rock and falling into the water was a highlight and contributed to the ‘best time’.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text structure and organisation that help the audience follow the writer’s ideas</td>
<td>There is an introduction that orientates the reader to the topic of the writing—a visit to the river on a hot, sunny day. The writer does not link this explicitly to <em>The best time I ever had</em>—and it is not clear from the introduction that this is what the writing is about. The writing jumps from past to present tense and back again, and from 1st to 2nd person, which contributes to reader confusion about the timing of events.** Linking words such as ‘Then finally … ’, ‘As I was climbing … ‘ give some clues as to the order in which the events happened. However, some parts are hard for the reader to work out—where was ‘the top’, for example, and how did it relate to the ‘rock’ and the ‘cliff’? How many times did the writer jump off the rock?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language that is appropriate for the reader</td>
<td>The writer includes some precise vocabulary (such as ‘cold, crystal clear water’) that helps the reader build up a mental image of the scene. The writer’s use of capital letters to emphasise key points adds interest and impact for the reader and helps emphasise the writer’s meaning—that the rocks were really tough on their feet, and that jumping from the top was dramatic and exciting. The use of ellipses in the sentence ‘Then finally … the water’ also engages the reader, suggesting the writer’s excitement at arriving at the river.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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* The need for the reader to infer meaning can also be a characteristic of highly effective writing. Skilled writers are able to show, not tell* and/or leave the reader *space* to interpret the writer’s message in different ways. This involves a high level of control of the writing process through careful structuring, use of language, and selection of detail to support the reader’s ability to make meaning without the text being totally explicit. We noticed some examples of this across the NMSSA student writing. They were mostly from Year 8 students who scored in the ‘high’ category.

** Skilled writers often break conventions such as consistent use of tense and point of view. This requires a high level of control of the conventions and the ability to manipulate them to achieve particular effects.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideas and information that are relevant for audience</strong></td>
<td>The writer has included relevant ideas to help the reader learn about the topic Me. There is a mix of details that help the reader to pick out the student from their classmates ('orange hair and bluesh green eyes; white skin; wearing a singlet and shorts') and details about favourite school subjects and sports that do not help the reader pick the student out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Text structure and organisation that help the audience follow the writer’s ideas</strong></td>
<td>There is no introduction or opening statement to help the reader understand what the writing is about—the writer launches straight into the description. Details are scattered through the writing, moving back and forth between appearance and sports, which makes it harder for the reader to build a clear picture of the writer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language that is appropriate for the reader</strong></td>
<td>The writer uses some precise vocabulary in the first sentence ‘orange hair and bluesh green eyes’. However, there is little attempt to engage the reader—the writing is repetitive with similar sentence structures throughout.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Example 3: Me. Year 8.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas and information that are relevant for audience</th>
<th>Ideas are relevant for the topic and the details will help the reader find the writer from among their classmates ('young male, 12-13, average height, slightly chubby, blue hair, one silver earring').</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Text structure and organisation that help the audience follow the writer's ideas | The opening sentence introduces the topic to the reader in an interesting and engaging way, by asking the question 'would you like to learn how to find me?'
Clear signposting (e.g., 'First of all, once, when, once located') helps the reader follow the writer's logic and supports the idea of narrowing down the search from the class to a group to a specific student. Ideas are grouped effectively. |
| Language that is appropriate for the reader | The writer uses precise language that helps the reader build a vivid mental image (the phrase 'suspected unknown creature' while distinctive, is perhaps a little jarring).
A range of language features engage and interest the reader. The reader is addressed directly throughout with consistent use of the second person (you), including a rhetorical question ('Would you like to learn how to find me?').
There is a strong sense of the writer's voice—the personality of the writer shines through the writing. |

Start your writing here:

- I'm a student from ___________.
- School would you like too know how to find me? First of all, you need to locate the loudest area of the classroom.
- Once you have discovered that area, you will have to search for a boy within the age limit of twelve.
- Thirteen, when you then have located the specimen, of the boys within the age limit, start to narrow down your suspects, to their physical appearance. Once at each suspected unknown creature, too determine within his or her slightly chubby but between.
- Then, the average height of a twelve year old. Once located, list the key features of his body (hair colour, eye colour, voice tone, etc.)
- If you have found most of these features, you will then need to make sure the boy you are focused upon is a blue-haired young male, has one silver earring, has a cheeky tone, and is overall a great boy with a wonderful sense of humour. Once you have finished this, you have successfully found a student named ___________.

[redacted]
### Example 4: A special person. Year 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas and information that are relevant for audience</th>
<th>The ideas are relevant—the writer introduces a person to the reader and provides supporting reasons to show why this person is special to the writer. Each reason is accompanied by specific examples.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text structure and organisation that help the audience follow the writer’s ideas</td>
<td>There is an introduction that tells the reader who the special person is. However, the reader must work out the link between the introduction and the following paragraphs (i.e., that the reasons are designed to show why the person is special). We can infer this information from the context, but an explicit statement such as ‘I will give you some reasons why Luke is special to me’ would make the connection clearer for the reader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language that is appropriate for the reader</td>
<td>Specific language such as ‘orienteering’ (orienteering) and ‘retaining wall’ helps the reader to engage with the examples and understand the writer’s ideas. The writer addresses the reader directly at the beginning of the third paragraph (‘The next reason that I have to share with you’), creating connection and interest for the reader.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example 5: A *special person*. Year 4.

This engaging piece of writing shows a strong use of language to create vivid images for the reader. However, the choice of content means that it is not effective in conveying the intended message (specified in the writing task).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas and information that are relevant for audience</th>
<th>The ideas are only partially relevant—the reader can see that the writing is about a specific person, but there are no details that suggest the person is special to the writer or why.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text structure and organisation that help the audience follow the writer’s ideas</td>
<td>The writer launches directly into the writing without telling the reader who Lisyanna is or what the writing will be about. The repeated use of ‘purple’ and ‘dark blue’ helps to guide the reader through the writing (purple and dark blue are introduced in the opening sentence, then each addressed in turn). This process breaks down in the last sentence, which introduces a new colour, yellow, in place of pink. Use of the word ‘final’ in the last sentence is helpful in signalling to the reader that the writing is coming to an end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language that is appropriate for the reader</td>
<td>The writer has used precise vocabulary to describe colours (e.g., dark blue is the colour of the ocean). The phrase ‘pinky pink pink’ is distinctive and helps the reader imagine an intense, bright pink. It also gives us a glimpse of the writer’s personality, or voice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What can teachers do?

There are many ways to help students focus on the needs of their reader as they plan, draft, refine and review their writing. A first step is to introduce authentic writing tasks that involve direct interaction with, and feedback from, a real audience: for example, blogs that friends, parents and whānau can respond to by replying and adding comments.

Planning

Encourage students to identify the topic, purpose and audience at the planning stage before they begin their writing. To help students become familiar with this process, you could look at some pieces of published writing of different types (for example, School Journal articles or stories, or short news or promotional pieces), and decide as a group what the topic, purpose and audience is for each one.

If students are responding to written task instructions, encourage careful reading to identify (and perhaps highlight) key words relating to the topic, purpose and audience. If an audience is not specified, encourage students to think of a person they might be writing to (for example a specific family member, friend, or teacher).

To focus on the needs of the audience, encourage students to ask questions at the planning stage such as:

• Who am I writing to? Who is my reader?
• How can I interest my reader in my topic?
• What might my reader know already about my topic?
• How can I help my reader to understand my ideas or explanation, build a picture from my description, or follow my story or recount?

Practise targeting writing to different audiences. One way of doing this is to co-construct, as a class or group, two pieces of writing with the same topic and purpose. Write each one for a different audience. For example, you could write an invitation to a class event for students in another class at your school, and an invitation to the same event for a person in the community who has never visited the school before. What changes would you make to content, structure, and/or language for the two different audiences?

Drafting

It is important for students to be aware that their writing will be read by someone. As students begin drafting their writing, encourage them to keep their reader in mind. Putting themselves in the shoes of their reader will help make sure that the organisation and flow of ideas are clear and that there is the right level of detail. Being able to take the reader’s perspective is often harder for younger students. One way of encouraging this is by getting them to read their work aloud to themselves. Do the ideas make sense? Are there any gaps? What is missing and what needs more detail? Leaving a gap between drafting, writing and reviewing helps students to step back and take the reader’s perspective more easily.

Reviewing and refining

Students need lots of opportunities to share their writing as they draft it, for example with a friend, family member, or writing buddy. Sharing the draft writing with someone who is not working on the same task can be particularly helpful. Encourage students to ask their reader what they did and did not understand, and what questions they have. Did they have any problems connecting the ideas—was the writer’s train of thought clear? Was it easy to work out the main points?

To practise describing in detail to help a reader build a mental image, ask students to pick one of a series of objects that look quite similar and describe it so that their partner can pick out the object that is being described. The more similar the objects, the harder the task will be—try using a group of potatoes or apples, for example. The writer could ask the reader ‘What was the most useful detail? What other details would have helped?’