# Understanding Beginning Writers' Narrative Writing with a Multidimensional Assessment Approach

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**Abstract :** Writing is thought to be the most complex facet of language arts. Assessing writing is difficult and subjective, and there are few scientifically validated assessments exist. Research has proposed evaluating writing using a multidimensional approach, including both qualitative and quantitative measures of handwriting, spelling and prose. Given that narrative writing has historically been a staple of literacy instruction in primary grades and is one of the three major genres Common Core State Standards required students to acquire starting in kindergarten, it is essential for teachers to understand how to measure beginning writers writing development and sources of writing difficulties through narrative writing. Guided by the theoretical models of early written expression and using empirical data, this study examines ways teachers can enact a comprehensive approach to understanding beginning writer's narrative writing through three writing rubrics developed for a Curriculum-based Measurement (CBM). The goal is to help classroom teachers structure a framework for assessing early writing in primary classrooms. Participants in this study included 380 first-grade students from 50 classrooms in 13 schools in three school districts in a Mid-Atlantic state. Three writing tests were used to assess first graders' writing skills in relation to both transcription (i.e., handwriting fluency and spelling tests) and translational skills (i.e., a narrative prompt). First graders were asked to respond to a narrative prompt in 20 minutes. Grounded in theoretical models of earlier expression and empirical evidence of key contributors to early writing, all written samples to the narrative prompt were coded three ways for different dimensions of writing: length, quality, and genre elements. To measure the quality of the narrative writing, a traditional holistic rating rubric was developed by the researchers based on the CCSS and the general traits of good writing. Students' genre knowledge was measured by using a separate analytic rubric for narrative writing. Findings showed that first-graders had emerging and limited transcriptional and translational skills with a nascent knowledge of genre conventions. The findings of the study provided support for the Not-So-Simple View of Writing in that fluent written expression, measured by length and other important linguistic resources measured by the overall quality and genre knowledge rubrics, are fundamental in early writing development. Our study echoed previous research findings on children's narrative development. The study has practical classroom application as it informs writing instruction and assessment. It offered practical guidelines for classroom instruction by providing teachers with a better understanding of first graders' narrative writing skills and knowledge of genre conventions. Understanding students' narrative writing provides teachers with more insights into specific strategies students might use during writing and their understanding of good narrative writing. Additionally, it is important for teachers to differentiate writing instruction given the individual differences shown by our multiple writing measures. Overall, the study shed light on beginning writers' narrative writing, indicating the complexity of early writing development.

**Keywords :** writing assessment, early writing, beginning writers, transcriptional skills, translational skills, primary grades, simple view of writing, writing rubrics, curriculum-based measurement

**Conference Title :** ICECET 2024 : International Conference on Early Childhood Education and Technology
**Conference Location :** Chengdu, China
**Conference Dates :** April 11-12, 2024