

An Analysis of Large-Scale Writing Assessments in Canada (Grades 5-8)

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This paper reports on an analysis of large-scale assessments of Grades 5-8 students' writing across 10 provinces and 2 territories in Canada. Theory, classroom practice, and the contributions and constraints of large-scale writing assessment are brought together with a focus on Grades 5-8 writing in order to provide both a broad view of Canada-wide assessments and specific recommendations for enhancing the validity of provincial and territorial writing assessment in Canada.

We deductively analyzed the primary assessment administration documents found on the provincial and territorial education websites using the categories of (a) design (e.g., grades at which the tests are written, the goals of the tests, the number and types of written compositions that are gathered, (b) administration (e.g., time of year, length of time provided to students to write, and pre-writing activities), and (c) the scoring of the assessments. We also used tenets of effective writing assessment from a process writing approach and from a multiliteracies approach to analyze the assessment procedures.

Our analysis shows that process writing approaches have influenced the administration procedures in terms of the provision of time to talk with peers before writing and the recognition of various composition and thinking processes. However, composing processes are directed to be less idiosyncratic and recursive than composition theorists and noted teachers of writing would recommend. The assessments do not yet reflect an awareness of multiliteracies theory, as there is little use of digital technology to write and portfolio assessments and the collaborative writing of Web 2.0 practices are non-existent.

Cet article fait état d'une analyse d'évaluations à grande échelle de rédactions d'élèves de la 5e à la 8e année dans 10 provinces et 2 territoires au Canada. Se penchant sur les rédactions écrites par des élèves de la 5e à la 8e année, nous réunissons la théorie, la pratique en salle de classe et les avantages et les contraintes liés aux évaluations à grande échelle pour élaborer un aperçu général des évaluations pancanadiennes et des recommandations spécifiques visant l'augmentation de la validité des évaluations de l'écriture dans les provinces et les territoires du Canada.

Nous avons analysé par déduction les documents administratifs de l'évaluation principale tirés des sites Web d'éducation des provinces et des territoires. Notre analyse reposait sur les trois catégories suivantes : (a) conception (p. ex. niveau scolaire auquel on écrit les examens, objectifs des examens, nombre et type de rédactions exigées), (b) administration (p.ex. période de l'année, temps de rédaction accordée aux élèves, activités de pré-écriture et (c) évaluation des examens. Nous nous sommes également appuyés sur les principes de l'évaluation efficace des rédactions selon une approche processus et une approche axée sur la multilittératie pour analyser les procédures d'évaluation.

Notre analyse démontre que les approches processus à l'écriture ont influencé les procédures administratives quant au temps accordé à la discussion avec les pairs avant l'écriture et quant à la reconnaissance de divers processus de rédaction et de réflexion. Toutefois, les processus d'écriture imposés sont moins idiosyncratiques et récurrents que des théoriciens de l'écriture et des enseignants éminents de la rédaction recommanderaient. Les évaluations ne reflètent pas encore une prise de conscience de la théorie de la multilittératie, l'emploi de la technologie numérique pour écrire étant très limité, et les évaluations de portfolios et l'écriture coopérative qui découle des pratiques de Web 2.0 étant inexistantes.

The stated goals for Canadian provincial and territorial tests are to monitor and provide publicly-available information about student achievement at particular grade levels. These tests, however, have become increasingly influential in shaping curriculum, policy, and even classroom practice (Couture, 2009; Hammer, 2010; McEwen, 1995; Slomp, 2007). In light of the focus on and expense of large-scale testing, researchers and teachers raise concerns about over-reliance on such measures. Nichols and Berliner (2007) argue that testing regimes grow to impose and embody a set of norms and expectations that drive teachers' curriculum and pedagogical choices, resulting in the corruption of both the tests and the educational system they are created to monitor. Couture (2009) points out the narrowness of the Alberta provincial tests, for example, which focus on only one-third of the curriculum outcomes and only on certain programs of studies. Discussions about these concerns can be most productive when researchers, educators and policy makers have a close familiarity with the range of testing practices across the country and a sense of how these practices align with research-supported practices. This paper provides a needed comprehensive analysis of large-scale English language writing assessments across Canada.

Another impetus for this analysis of the provincial and territorial writing assessments across Canada comes from previous research involving interviews with 216 Grades 4-8 teachers across the country (Peterson, McClay, & Main, 2010). Teachers told us that the tests are influential to their classroom teaching and assessment procedures for classroom assignments. As such, it is important to determine whether these writing assessments mirror accepted research-based theories and approaches, and, if so, in what ways.

An awareness of the approaches, purposes and procedures of the provincial and territorial writing tests provides a starting point for improving assessment practices at the classroom and provincial/territorial levels across the country. Because the tests are locally developed within each province/territory by educators, designers of provincial and territorial writing assessments in Canada are well positioned to develop writing assessments that reflect theory- and research-based principles and methods and that produce acceptably valid measures of students' writing achievement. To this end, this paper reports the results of an analysis of the provincial/territorial assessments of Grades 4-8 English language writing, addressing the following research questions:

1. How closely are the tests and administration procedures aligned with (a) process writing approaches and (b) multiliteracies theory, and with the research-supported practices for teaching and assessing writing derived from these two theoretical orientations?
2. How closely are the scoring guides aligned with the six traits of writing, a research-based and widely-used set of criteria for assessing writing?

This examination of Canadian large-scale assessments in English language arts education provides a window into the underlying principles and understandings that shape large-scale writing assessment within Canada. Given that K-12 schooling in Canada is a provincial/territorial jurisdiction and procedures for administering the tests vary across the country, this report presents an overview of the assessments conducted in each province and territory.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Previous research examining Canadian large-scale assessments lays a foundation for our current work. Klinger, Deluca, and Miller (2008) have provided a history of large-scale testing in each province and territory across Canada, and classified the purposes and uses of large-scale tests in Canada using an administrative lens. Other researchers have examined students' views on one province's high stakes provincial test (Luce-Kapler & Klinger, 2005), and conducted mixed-methods analyses of the tests and their impact on teachers and students (Slomp, 2007). Our analysis takes both an administrative and conceptual approach. We examine the purposes and procedures, but also consider both process writing and multiliteracies theoretical lenses. The process writing approaches align with Canadian teachers' classroom assessment practices (as found in previous research—Peterson, McClay, & Main, 2010) and multiliteracies theory aligns with widespread contemporary approaches to literacy instruction and assessment. In addition, multiliteracies theory addresses the broader sweep of global views of social practices of literacy, attending to the “design of social futures” that literacy affords (New London Group, 2000).

Process Writing Approaches

The first thread of analysis draws upon writing process approaches, the most influential paradigm in current K-12 writing instruction (Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, & Valdés, 2004). Honouring both the written product and the composing and thinking processes involved in creating that product, writing process approaches draw on cognitive processing theory (Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam, van den Bergh, & van Hout-Wolters, 2004; Flower & Hayes, 1981). This theory, based on extensive observations of writers and of interviews with them about their writing processes, recognizes writing processes as a set of recursive, and non-linear thinking, and composing processes by which a writer attempts to solve rhetorical problems and achieve specific communicative purposes. The various thinking and composing processes (e.g., setting goals, planning, drafting, revising, editing) may be repeated in any sequence with variations across any population of writers and across writing contexts and tasks. A fundamental principle of process writing approaches is that students require opportunities to make choices about the topic, purpose, genre, and audience for their writing. Writers feel a greater commitment to their writing when they have the autonomy to make such choices (Atwell, 1987; Calkins & Harwayne, 1987; Graves, 2004).

Derived from seminal work by Graves (1985), Murray (1985), and Elbow (1973), among others, and popularized in classroom contexts by such teacher-researchers as Atwell (1987) and Calkins and Harwayne (1987), process writing approaches to writing have also framed research on writing assessment. The goal of writing assessment, according to advocates of process writing approaches, should be students' growth as writers, a goal more likely to be achieved when students are provided opportunities to revise their writing after receiving feedback. The

feedback to students should be “task specific, problem-specific, and learner-specific” (Haswell, 2009, p. 16), rather than general statements that could apply to any piece of writing. Feedback should be provided regularly during the composing process to ensure that students’ revisions improve the quality of their writing (Beach & Friedrich, 2006; Graves, 2004). Teachers, peers and the student writers, themselves, should be involved in assessing the writing. Student-teacher conferences (Ferris, 2003; Frank, 2001), written comments (Beach, 1989; Straub, 1997), and peer conferences (Christian, 2000; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Nelson & Murphy, 1993) are procedures used to provide this specific feedback to students on their writing.

Multiliteracies Theory

Our second thread of analysis draws upon multiliteracies theory, which views writing as a social practice that embraces linguistically and culturally diverse ways of using language and representational modes, such as graphic designs and web-based media, as well as print (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; New London Group, 2000). We use a multiliteracies lens, as well as a process writing lens because multiliteracies theory has been a dominant theoretical foundation for research on literacy teaching and learning in the past 15 years (New London Group, 2000; Street, 1995). Moreover, provincial curricula and regional frameworks in English Language Arts include tacit acceptance of multiliteracies theory in their references, for example, to “oral, print, and other media texts” (Alberta Education, 2000).

In this view of literacy, “meanings are made, distributed, received, interpreted and remade in interpretation through many representational and communicative modes—not just through language” (Jewitt & Kress, 2003, p. 1). The relative dominance of language is a matter of contestation among theorists and educators, but the basic tenet is that modern communication uses multiple modes of representation (e.g., digital texts, such as wikis and weblogs, as well as multi-media texts), and all modes are important and contribute mightily to meaning-making. Within the domain of linguistic representation of meaning, multiliteracies proponents recognize that literacies are also multiple in terms of drawing upon diverse languages and cultures.

Multiliteracies theory focuses on the social nature of composition and of participation in practices of literacy. It attends to the global reach of individuals, who can easily cross linguistic and cultural borders in literacy practices now. With an awareness of the global reach of digital communication tools, researchers and teachers working from multiliteracies perspectives seek to educate young people to participate both as creators and consumers in multimodal, multicultural, and multilingual environments. Barton and Lee (2009), for example, find multilingual aspects in the postings of participants in an online photo-sharing site; they categorize the ways in which on-line vernacular communication assumes diverse cultural and lingual practices for participants and includes multiple languages with varying amounts of translation. In such ways, traditional borders between the global and the local practices of literacy have become porous, for young people as well as for adults, and literate people must account for cultural variations and norms in many communicative situations.

Teachers, however, cannot simply blend the global with the local; in classrooms, other layers of boundaries and borders require attention. Classroom assessment practices, as we found in our study of Canadian teachers of writing, must be seen within the broader context of provincial policies and mandates. The teachers in our national study identified provincial and territorial assessment structures and expectations as important sources of materials and procedures for their classroom assessment of writing.

Research Methods

Data Sources

In order to access the varied large scale writing assessments used nationally, we systematically consulted all of the provincial and territorial education web sites. Information for this research was limited to that which was made publically accessible on the Internet. Because our previous research focus had been on Grades 4-8, we examined only the large-scale assessments of Grades 4-8 students' writing. The Yukon and Northwest Territories base their assessments on the Alberta English Language Assessment and, thus, are not reported separately. As Nunavut is currently developing a writing assessment, this Canadian territory has not been included in this study. It is important to note that because each province/territory is responsible for its own curriculum and assessment protocol, the information available to the public varies by province/territory. While we endeavored to create a comprehensive representation of the large-scale writing assessments of each of the provinces and territories, we were constrained in this goal because of inconsistencies concerning the depth of information that each of the provinces/territories released to the public (e.g., instructions such as scripts that were provided to teachers for use during the assessment were available for some provincial tests and not for others). Each province had a primary administration document used to explain the salient features of the writing assessments. The contents of the documents do not align consistently, so we describe them below for the sake of greater transparency. We also analyzed the secondary documents where scoring guides and student exemplars were described in separate documents.

We analyzed these administration documents:

- Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education: The *Information Booklet Provincial Assessment Language Arts/ Mathematics* reports administrative procedures, scheduling, components and analytic and holistic rubrics. The *Language Arts* booklet includes sample questions and scoring guides used in previous years.
- Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood: The *Elementary Literacy Assessment Administration Guide* describes the assessment schedule, information for teachers, curriculum links, preparation hints, and content of the tests.
- Nova Scotia Department of Education: The *Elementary Literacy Assessment Information Guide* consists of administrative procedures, curriculum links, content, scoring, reporting and rubrics.
- Government of New Brunswick Department of Education: The *Grade 7 Literacy Assessment Information Bulletin* provides an overview of the assessment, administration schedule, and achievement standards for writing. *Student Writing Samples from Grade 7 Literacy Writing Assessments* addresses student work, assigned achievement level and the assessment rationale.
- Quebec Ministry of Education, Recreation and Sport: *Information Document Compulsory Examination English Language Arts Cycle Three* details the exam's structure, needed materials, administration procedures, scoring and rubrics. The Quebec Ministry of Education releases student exemplars from previous years and includes assessment scales and commentary.

- Ontario - Education Quality Accountability Office (EQAO): *Administering Assessment of Reading, Writing and Mathematics* and the teacher bulletins present information for educators, students and parents regarding administration of the assessment, content, reporting, and preparation. The EQAO's released assessment booklets, *Grade 6 Student Booklets: Language 1 and 2*, as well as the corresponding exemplars with annotated rubrics, are for use in preparing students for the assessment.
- Manitoba Department of Education and Training: The *Manitoba Middle Years Assessment of Key Competencies Mathematics, Reading Comprehension, Expository Writing and Student Engagement* provides information about the purpose, implementation, assessment and reporting for expository writing. Manitoba uses levels of performance to assess expository writing competency as located in the provincial report of student performance.
- Saskatchewan Ministry of Education: The *Assessment for Learning Program Provincial Writing Assessment* includes information about the focus, components, tools, scoring and standard setting, preparing students for the assessment, administration procedures, timeline, and scoring rubrics. Saskatchewan Ministry of Education releases samples of previous tests for student, teacher and public use. They include scoring rubrics.
- Alberta Education: The subject bulletin for Grade 6 English Language Arts (ELA) assessment provides a description of the assessment, reporting categories, marking procedures and scoring guides. Alberta also releases samples of previous tests for student, teacher and public use. As well, the *Examples of the Standards for Student Writing 2008* includes student work and annotated scoring guides.
- British Columbia Ministry of Education: The *Foundational Skills Assessment* website includes links to summaries for students, parents and guardians about the purpose, costs, timelines, scoring and reporting. *Foundational Skills Assessment: Student Response Booklet Grade 7* is a sample response booklet containing student directions, suggested time overview, questions and response space. The *Grade 7 FSA Scales* details expectations for writing for the shorter persuasive writing piece, and the longer informal essay.

Data Analysis

Our initial deductive analysis involved the following categories relating to the design of the assessments (e.g., the grades at which the tests are written, the goals of the tests, the number and types of written compositions that are gathered). We also identified the administration of the assessments (e.g., time of year, length of time provided to students to write, and pre-writing activities), and the scoring of the assessments.

Our deductive analysis of the scoring guides drew on a widely used set of scoring categories identified by teachers in our cross-Canada survey, the six traits model (Spandel, 2005). These categories are: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions and presentation. We identified the correspondence between traits assessed in the provincial/territorial scoring guides and those in the six traits model. We wanted to see how closely the view of good writing communicated through the scoring categories aligns with the view that has been widely accepted by teacher educators and teachers. We also identified the number of levels of achievement and what the levels represented (e.g., achievement of grade level expectations or meeting criteria) to determine how provincial and territorial ministries and

departments of education defined writing achievement.

We conducted a deductive analysis of the provincial/territorial achievement test documents for assessing writing using the tenets of effective writing assessment from a process writing approach and from a multiliteracies approach. We used these tenets of a process writing approach to teaching and assessing writing:

1. Honour students' recursive writing processes (e.g., planning, drafting, revising, editing),
2. Give students some choice of topic, genre, purpose, and audience,
3. Provide sufficient time to plan, draft, revise and edit, and
4. Provide immediate, specific, ongoing feedback with the goal of supporting students' growth as writers.

We employed the following tenets of a multiliteracies approach to teaching and assessing writing:

1. Attend to social aspects of composition,
2. Acknowledge linguistic and cultural diversity,
3. Use multiple modalities (e.g., print, visual images, auditory messages), and
4. Include the use of digital technology and multi-media.

To ensure reliability of results, initially, all three authors analyzed 30% of each of the documents using all three lenses (the administrative lens, the process writing lens and the multiliteracies lens) to establish a common perspective on the interpretations of each lens. Then, each of the three authors did a full analysis of all documents using one of the lenses.

Design, Administration and Scoring of the Provincial and Territorial Writing Tests

Nine of the provinces and territories hold middle-years writing assessments at Grade 6, while in British Columbia and New Brunswick the testing occurs in Grade 7. Saskatchewan is an exception, as the testing occurs twice in the middle-years time frame: in Grades 5 and 8.

Students generally write the provincial and territorial writing assessments in May or June (although students in Quebec may write in April or May), with the exception of three provinces. Grade 7 students in New Brunswick write in mid-October. Grade 7 students in British Columbia and teachers of Grade 8 students in Manitoba submit the records of their students' writing achievement as demonstrated in classroom writing assignments to the Manitoba Department of Education in January.

With the exception of New Brunswick, which asks students to write one piece, all of the other provincial writing assessments require two pieces of writing, often a long and a short piece.

All provinces and territories clearly link their writing assessments to curricular expectations. For the most part, the stated goals are school-wide, district-wide or province-wide. Only Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island mention that results are meant to help teachers plan programs for individual students who need support.

Table 1

Design of Provincial and Territorial Writing Assessments

Province	Name of Assessment	Format of Assessment	What is Assessed	Genre Utilized	Grade	Month(s) of Assessment
Newfoundland and Labrador	Criterion Reference Test: English Language Arts	2 pieces (1 written prompt, 1 visual) on 2 different days; 30 – 60 minutes per task; 2 weeks (reading, listening & speaking, and math)	Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking	2 pieces of demand writing (narrative and transactional)	6	May - June
Prince Edward Island	Elementary Literacy Assessment	2 consecutive days for 1 hour each; no “good” copy; schedule before recess & after break revise; respond to prompt; teacher discretion for timeline.	Writing and Reading	Personal, expressive, and transactional	6	May
Nova Scotia	Elementary Literacy Assessment	1 ½ hours for 4 days	Reading and Viewing, and Writing and Other Ways of Representing	Transactional and literary prose (persuasive letter and story)	6	October
New Brunswick	Literacy Assessment	2 sessions of 60 minutes each over 1 week; edited draft	Reading and Writing	Prompts: narrative, informational text	7	October
Quebec	Compulsory Examination English Language Arts Elementary Cycle Three	2 weeks; multiple sessions; time to explore ideas and seek feedback; allow sufficient time – total assessment 10 – 15 hours.	Reading, Viewing, Discussing, Responding and Writing	Personal, expressive, transactional	2 nd Year, Cycle Three (Gr. 6)	April - May
Ontario	Assessment of Reading, Writing and Mathematics Junior Division	2 x 1 hour sessions for each read & write booklet = 4 hours (extra continuous time permitted).	Reading, Writing and Mathematics	2 -3 paragraphs, 1 longer transactional piece	6	Last week of May – First week of June
Manitoba	Provincial Assessments and Standards Testing	Teachers submit scores of classroom writing they have marked.	Reading Comprehension and Writing	Exposition; narration.	8	January
Saskatchewan	Provincial Learning Assessment Program Assessment for Learning	Set locally; suggested time 3 hours over 2 – 3 week period; randomized exposition or narrative; student reflection on the topic encouraged.	Writing	Exposition; narration.	5	May
Alberta, Yukon and Northwest Territories	English Language Arts Assessment	110 minutes; may use computers	Writing and Reading	Narrative; functional	6	May (Fall for NWT)
British Columbia	Foundation Skills Assessment	Short writing for 30 minutes; long writing for 60 min. Guide students through timed pre-planning; Short writing independent; Long writing with a partner (several sessions; not the same day)	Reading Comprehension, Writing and Numeracy	Personal response (33%); story/narrative (67%)	7	January - February

Table 2
Analysis of Provincial and Territorial Scoring Guides Using Six-Traits Assessment Categories

Province	Levels of Competence	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions and Presentation	Other
Newfoundland and Labrador	Very Limited Limited Adequate Strong Outstanding	X	X	X	X	X	Conventions	
Prince Edward Island	Not available							
Nova Scotia	Does not Meet Criteria Meets criteria	X	X				Matters of Correctness	
New Brunswick	Appropriate Achievement Strong Achievement	Content	X	X	X	Sentence Structure	Conventions	
Quebec	Minimal Partial Acceptable Thorough Advanced	Combines Organization and Ideas		X	Structures and Features		Grammar & Paragraphing and Spelling & Punctuation	
Ontario	Blank Illegible/Off Topic Code 10 – response is not developed Code 20 – response is minimally developed Code 30 – response has a clear focus [Code 40 – response has a clear focus – only for Topic Development]	Topic Development					Conventions	

Table 2—Continued

Province	Levels of Competence	Ideas	Organization	Voice	Word Choice	Sentence Fluency	Conventions and Presentation	Other
Manitoba	Not Meeting Approaching Meeting Mid-Grade 8 Level of Performance	Student generates, selects and organizes ideas to support reader's understanding			Student chooses language (word choices and sentences) to make an impact on the reader)		Student uses conventions and resources (spell-checker, thesauruses, dictionaries, etc.) to edit and proofread to make meaning clear	
Saskatchewan	Poor Average Excellent	Message Content or Ideas (main idea, understanding, support)	Organization and Coherence (introduction, coherence, conclusion)		Language Choices (use of language, word choice, syntax and mechanics)			Writing Process (Pre-writing, Drafting, Revising)
Alberta, Yukon and Northwest Territories (narrative)	Insufficient Limited Poor Satisfactory Proficient Excellent	Content	X		Vocabulary	Sentence Structure	Conventions	
Alberta, Yukon and Northwest Territories (functional writing)		Content			Content Management			
British Columbia	Not yet within expectations Meets expectations Fully meets expectations Exceeds expectations	Meaning	Form		Style		Conventions	Snapshot

Characteristics of Scoring Guides

Teachers and educators are trained as assessors, with student exemplars playing a key role in preparation. Eight of the provinces/territories use analytic rubrics, which are scoring guides that provide a score for each element of the writing (e.g., content, style, conventions). Ontario and New Brunswick use holistic rubrics exclusively (scoring guides that provide one score for the piece of writing, as all elements of the writing are assessed together). Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador use both analytic and holistic rubrics.

As Table 2 shows, in Nova Scotia and Manitoba, teachers are asked to assess whether students' writing meets expected standards of criteria, with Nova Scotia having two categories (meets/does not meet) and Manitoba having two gradients of not meeting minimum levels (not meeting/approaching). All other provinces recognize excellence in students' writing, as well as achievement and non-achievement of expectations. Three provinces and two territories (Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec, Alberta, Northwest Territories, Yukon) have five levels of achievement—two levels above grade level expectations and two levels below. Ontario and New Brunswick have four levels—one level above grade level expectations and two levels below. Saskatchewan has three levels of achievement.

All provinces and territories use a scoring category related to Spandel's *ideas* category, though the label for the category is changed (e.g., *topic development* in Ontario, *content* in New Brunswick, Alberta, Yukon Territory and Northwest Territories). Only Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick and Quebec use a separate category for *voice*. Nova Scotia and Ontario only assess the *ideas* and *organization* (combined into one category in Ontario) and *conventions*. Their scoring guides do not include elements of style. The Nova Scotia document refers to conventions as "matters of correctness" (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, 2009), in contrast to Manitoba's description of conventions and resources to edit and proofread in order to "make meaning clear" (Manitoba Education, n.d.). The latter is more closely aligned with a view of writing as communication, rather than as a product to be assessed (Graves, 2004).

Viewing Design and Administration Procedures through a Writing Processes Theoretical Lens

Our analysis of the administration procedures of the Canadian provincial and territorial writing achievement tests is organized according to the writing process tenets identified in the literature review.

Honour students' recursive writing processes. In all provinces, writing and thinking processes associated with a process writing approach, such as brainstorming ideas, determining the intended audience and purpose, as well as drafting, revising and editing, are recognized. In British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario, the test booklets are structured in recognition of the various stages of the writing process. In British Columbia, for example, students are provided with a planning page for their persuasive piece. The planning page provides an organizer for students to identify the purpose and audience for their writing. It contains space to plan an introduction, convincing reasons for students' choices and the conclusion. In Alberta, students are provided a blank, full-page square for planning their writing in whatever way they choose. Likewise, in Ontario, students have a square to write their ideas and lined paper with instructions to write their story in the indicated space (Education Quality

and Accountability Office, 2008). In Saskatchewan, there are separate sections of the test booklets for planning and drafting. Students are encouraged to revise and edit their writing with a red pen. Thus, phases of writing processes are addressed, though not necessarily in a manner that encourages recursivity in the process.

Give students choice of topic, genre, purpose, and audience. Students are provided with topics and genres to write in all provinces and territories except New Brunswick, where students choose from a “variety of writing prompts” (New Brunswick Department of Education, 2008a, p. 1) and Manitoba, where teachers prepare reports of students’ attainment of key competencies identified by the Manitoba Department of Education based on the classroom writing that students have completed between September and January. In Quebec, Grade 6 students are provided the genre: “a modern day story or traditional tale for a selected audience” (Gouvernement du Québec Ministère de l’Éducation du Loisir et du Sport, 2010, p. 2), but the topic is wide open. While students are asked to write on a pre-determined topic, the assigned topics are fairly open-ended in other provinces. For example, in the sample provided for the Newfoundland and Labrador *Criterion Referenced* test, students are instructed: “You have just been told that you may spend a day with ANYONE in the world you choose. Describe all the details of this special event. Be creative and descriptive” (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2010). For the persuasive writing that British Columbia students do, the sample topic, “A Better Life?” includes a statement: “Not all wild animals live in the wilderness. Some live in alternative homes that humans have provided. In your opinion, should humans provide alternative homes for wild animals?” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 7). Students may choose to present an argument that takes either an affirmative or negative position. This prompt provides a choice of sorts, but within a very directed task that may be of very limited appeal to many students.

Provide sufficient time to plan, draft, revise and edit. The test administration procedures that are made available in a number of provinces follow the principle of providing time for pre-writing talk with others to generate, evaluate and develop ideas. Variations of pre-writing talk are allowed in Alberta, Manitoba, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories and the Yukon Territory. In Alberta, the Northwest Territories and the Yukon Territory, students have 10 minutes to talk with peers, in groups of 2 or 4, about potential ideas for their writing. Student talk is part of the performance tasks used in Manitoba. Students work in research groups during the initial stages of the writing process. Talk is also embedded into Quebec’s writing assessment. During the narrative writing task, students provide one another with feedback. In fact, talk is an overall focus of the assessment; another task used requires that students discuss the content of magazines in small and large groups. In Saskatchewan, teachers are scripted to inform students that they can help with directions but cannot help students “to understand the prompt, or to complete any of the planning, organization, or drafting” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, *Teacher Handbook*, n.d., p.16). This is also the instruction in Ontario. In other provinces, Prince Edward Island, for example, pre-writing talk is explicitly forbidden: “Teachers cannot do a brainstorming activity with the students prior to the writing assessment” (Prince Edward Island Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009, p. 11). Teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador are permitted to brainstorm with students about the visual prompt used with the story writing activity, as well as being able to advise students whether they are off-topic in their individual efforts.

The amount of time students need for drafting, revising and editing varies depending on

each student's writing style, the writing context, and the type of writing. The idiosyncrasies of students' individual writing processes are honoured to the greatest extent in the Manitoba writing assessment because the writing is completed in the classroom with no time restrictions. Generally, two hours are allotted, although students in British Columbia are given 90 minutes and students in Quebec have three hours to write their compositions. Quebec students have additional time, one hour, to create their media texts. However, teachers may allocate more time for the task if necessary. A period of days is allotted for students to write in Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan students, for example, have three one-hour periods over three days to plan, draft, and edit and revise their writing with the suggestion that students carry out each of the processes on separate days.

Provide immediate, specific, ongoing feedback with the goal of supporting students' growth as writers. Because provincial and territorial tests are intended to be summative evaluations, their goal is to monitor, rather than to influence student achievement. As a result, the effective feedback practices designed to improve writing are not applicable.

Indeed, feedback from teachers is not allowed on student writing for any of the provincial and territorial writing tests, except in Manitoba, where provincial achievement scores are based on classroom writing completed over four months. Additionally, in Quebec, teachers are instructed that "students must be given sufficient time during the examination to draft, to seek feedback from peers and to revise their writing before submitting the final version" (Gouvernement du Québec Ministère de l'Éducation du Loisir et du Sport, 2010, p. 2).

An Analysis of Design and Administration Procedures Using a Multiliteracies Lens

Consideration of multiliteracies perspectives should include, at a minimum, attention to (a) potential social aspects of composition (e.g., composing for a real-life purpose), (b) the linguistic and cultural diversity of the student population (e.g., having a wide range of choice of pictures, photographs, or settings from which students might choose), (c) the modalities used for the prompts and for student work (e.g., drawings, imported images from chosen web sites, along with print), and (d) the available technologies for students to use in writing (e.g., Internet technologies, as well as paper and pen). It is clearly not the intention of the test developers to create opportunities for social participation in a wider literacy world through these tests, nor do we suggest that this should be their primary intention. However, if such tests are to have some credibility as indicators of the skills that literate people bring to bear upon composition tasks, then they must attempt to mirror to some extent the actual literacy practices of literate people; to the extent that they do not do so, these limitations ought to be acknowledged.

Attention to social aspects of composition. The opportunity for social interaction in composition accords with attention to writing processes. As discussed above, there are provisions within the assessment-writing process for students in a number of provinces to seek and give feedback with peers, particularly in Manitoba where students' classroom writing is the basis for the provincial assessment. In its attention to the real world of literacy practices, multiliteracies theory points to the need for writers to learn to write collaboratively; moreover, a number of social participation venues online are structured for collaborative writing and for response to peers' writing. Collaborative writing, however, is allowed in only one jurisdiction for these tests—on the multimedia composition component of the Quebec test. The skills needed for collaboration do not come naturally; they need to be taught, but they are not a part of any of the

provincial or territorial assessments to date.

Acknowledgement of linguistic and cultural diversity. There is no substantive acknowledgement of the linguistic diversity of the Canadian school population in the general exams. There are exemptions for students who are English language learners. We do see some attempts to acknowledge cultural diversity in reference to Aboriginal cultures, for example in Manitoba's inclusion of the seal hunt as a potential writing topic for classroom writing that would be reported in the January assessments (Manitoba Education, n.d.), and in Saskatchewan's inclusion of such items as "sweet grass" and "eagle feather" in its list of household items in the writing prompt (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, *Grade 5 student writing booklet a*, n.d.). Some of the designated "audiences" for student writing prompts addressed culture in terms of young people's school culture; for example, the British Columbia test specifies that Grade 7 students should assume that their writing is for an audience of Grade 6 students, to whom they are giving advice.

Use of multiple modalities (e.g., print, visual images, auditory messages). Picture prompts are used in some of the assessments as inspirations for students' narrative writing, but the compositions that students create are expected to be linguistic only. In Manitoba, teachers may assign multimedia projects as part of the classroom writing samples they use for the provincial assessment.

Quebec is the outlier province both in its reader response/synthesis writing task and in structuring a multimedia composition task. In the reader response/synthesis task, students read a print text and then watch a National Film Board (NFB) video or listen to an audiotext. They then write a reader response to both texts (the print and video or audiotext) on a topic that spans the two works. Students are expected to present evidence from both texts and to demonstrate their ability to synthesize information from these two sources.

The Quebec media creation task is assessed by use of a rubric designed for that task alone. This rubric has three categories—*purpose and audience*, *structures and features (media conventions)*, and *narrative (plot line)*. Each category has five competency levels (Gouvernement du Québec Ministère de l'Éducation du Loisir et du Sport, 2010). Quebec includes an innovative aspect in the evaluation of the multimedia component of its tests: peer evaluation. Students view the multimedia creations of their classmates; such creations might be the writing and performance of a short play, audiotext, or news report, for example. Students are instructed to rate the works on a 1-5 scale of the provincial rubric, with 3 being the passing grade, and the teachers take the peer assessment into account in their grades.

Use of digital technology and multi-media. The opportunity for all students to compose on word processors is available to students in Alberta, where students are given the option to compose the on-demand writing, using word processors or pen and paper, and in Manitoba, where classroom writing is assessed. Elsewhere throughout the country, there is an expectation that students will compose in pen (*nota bene*: pencil use is excluded; the use of blue or black pen is specified). In Saskatchewan, students are required to write in blue or black pen and to show revisions using red pen. Computer use is, for the most part, limited to accommodations for special-needs students. Computer use is explicitly limited to special-needs students in Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. [Anecdotally, we see that this practice seems to have an effect on the attitudes of students in the classrooms in our study. Several teachers have commented that because computer use for composition is limited in their schools to special-needs students, there is a stigma associated with computer use in school; these teachers have indicated that their students do not seek

opportunities to use available computers for school composition because they do not wish to be seen as having “special needs” (Peterson, McClay, & Main, 2010).] Computer use for initial composition, however, affords writers the ability to compose and revise more efficiently and has been shown to have a positive impact on students’ willingness to revise their work (Selfe, 1987; Warschauer, 1999). From both writing process and multiliteracies perspectives, computer use is understood to be part of the normal composition regime of many literate people in Canada, but this acceptance has yet to be reflected in the assessments that drive pedagogical practice in Canada. There is neither an expectation nor the possibility for students to access digital affordances for the majority of these writing tasks; where computer use is allowed, it is only as an improved typewriter.

A summary by province/territory of the process writing approach and multiliteracies practices can be found in the Appendix.

Conclusions and Implications

When the test of construct validity (Huot, O’Neill & Moore, 2010) is applied to large-scale writing assessments, the ways in which students complete the writing assessment must be consistent with the framework for understanding what writers do when they write. For example, in the Canadian context where educators and test designers view writing as a process carried out within a communicative context, large-scale writing assessments must involve students writing for a communicative purpose while engaged in processes recognized as writing processes. In this way, there is a theoretical connection between what is understood as writing and the measures for assessing writing ability.

Furthermore, given evidence that provincial writing assessments influence classroom practice (Couture, 2009; McEwen, 1995; Hammer, 2010; Slomp, 2007), it is imperative that large-scale assessments align with effective theory and methods as closely as possible within the constraints of the large-scale context. Our analysis shows that process writing approaches have influenced the administration procedures of the Canadian provincial and territorial writing assessments in a number of positive ways. Most noteworthy is the provision of time to talk with peers before writing--a practice adopted in 8 of 12 territories and provinces. This research-supported practice, widely adopted by Canadian classroom teachers (Peterson, McClay, & Main, 2010), should be adopted by all provinces. The pre-writing talk allows students to receive feedback about the appropriateness of their ideas for the given purpose and helps students to generate and start organizing ideas (Graves, 2004).

The provincial and territorial achievement tests also align very closely with writing process approaches in their recognition of various composition and thinking processes. However, although students writing the large-scale tests are encouraged to plan, draft, revise, and edit, their composing processes are directed to be less idiosyncratic and recursive than theorists and noted teachers would recognize as typical (Atwell, 1987, 1998; Graves, 1991; Murray, 1985). Composition research of recent decades points to the idiosyncrasy of writing processes and to the need for teachers to provide multiple models and encourage students to discover *what works best* for them individually as writers. In the assessments that are done on a broad sweep of students, however, such individuality is not welcome or accommodated. The tools for writing are prescribed to the extent that students are instructed in some cases to use blue or black pen, with a red pen to be used for revisions and editing. Students whose teachers have helped them to explore varying habits and tools for writing are not allowed to bring those preferences to the

testing situation. This restriction is understandable but it can be a severe limitation for a young writer who, for example, has learned to rely on the eraser to keep a calm attitude toward initial drafting errors in his or her writing, an example cited by a teacher in our previous research on writing instructional practices in classrooms across the country (Peterson, McClay, & Main, 2010).

Of necessity for the administration of large-scale tests, the presentation of writing processes in these provincial and territorial documents is often truncated somewhat or substantially. The Manitoba provincial assessment is an outlier, in this respect, as the reports of student achievement are based on a portfolio of classroom writing, rather than an on-demand piece of writing. Writing processes, as seen in the provincial writing assessment documents of all other provinces, take on a more linear appearance when large numbers of students are expected to produce samples of writing in a narrow time frame. We see this reduction to linearity particularly in the assumption that organization of ideas precedes writing; moreover, this assumption can lead to inappropriate grading practices. In Saskatchewan, for example, students' pre-writing is evaluated for its organization as "excellent: prewriting is extensive and relevant and organization is evident; average: pre-writing is apparent and somewhat relevant and organization is somewhat evident;" or "poor: pre-writing is scant, and organization is not evident" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, *Teacher Handbook*, n.d., p. 20). The assumption here is that good writers plan their writing on paper before drafting; however, decades of studies of writers contradict this assumption for most writers and for most school writing purposes (Barrs, 1984; Emig, 1971; Graves, 1991; McClay, 2005).

In other provinces, however, a better balance is established between encouraging pre-writing but not expecting students to demonstrate organization in their pre-writing page; British Columbia, for example, provides a pre-writing chart but specifies that this chart will not be marked. In Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador, students write compositions over a period of days, but they are not allowed to revisit the previous day's writing, a restriction that works against the usefulness of the multi-day procedure.

Ideally, provincial assessments would be based on portfolios of classroom writing, as is the case in Manitoba. However, given that all other provinces and territories use on-demand writing, there are other practices that would align large-scale writing test procedures more appropriately with research. Students could be given 45-60 minutes each day over a number of days to write, with opportunities to plan, draft, revise, and edit at any time during those writing periods. Such a practice accords with the recursive, idiosyncratic nature of writing. As three provinces have extended the writing of the achievement test beyond the typical two-hour writing period, other jurisdictions can feel confident that the goals of large-scale assessments will not be compromised by such a practice.

In order to make the comparisons that are necessary in standardized tests, it would not be reasonable to expect the same level of student autonomy over topic, genre, audience, and purpose of the writing as teachers would provide in daily classroom instruction. The principle of choice could be applied to a greater degree, however. The choice of topics and audience could be more open-ended to provide students more latitude to draw on their background experiences and knowledge to demonstrate their writing abilities.

It is perhaps not surprising that the provincial and territorial assessment tests, with the exception of Quebec, do not yet reflect an awareness of multiliteracies theory with respect to writing tasks or processes for administering the assessments, given that literacy educators are still in the early stages of grappling with the implications of multiliteracies. We do see at least

implicit acknowledgement of multiliteracies theory with respect to the language arts programs of studies and the programs for the integration of communication and technology; such awareness, however, has not yet filtered to the assessment vehicles that drive teachers' conscious practices. It is anathema to multiliteracies theory to attempt to measure the literacy abilities of large numbers of students through such tools as paper-and-pen tests; it will be quite a while before schools reach the digital capability to provide more authentic assessment tasks for all students, unless the ministries are willing to move to portfolio assessment of such tasks (as is the case in Manitoba). Until and unless there is such willingness, however, the large-scale assessments are likely to become increasingly removed from the actual literacy practices of literate people. Such a gap between the real literacy world and schooled literacy, Ferreiro (2003) warns, leads to the irrelevance of school literacy in the eyes of the young. It is possible for large-scale writing assessment designers to take on a leadership role in taking up multiliteracies practices that may not yet be widespread in classrooms in order to foster greater acceptance in classroom assessment practices.

One repeated refrain of proponents of vigorous large-stakes testing regimes is that such tests are useful tools for accountability—of teachers and of schools (Couture, 2009). The accountability must be two-way, however, if it is to be credible. Assessment tools that do not reflect contemporary contexts and understandings of literacy are of very limited value, and it is important that those responsible for the continuing influence of such tests acknowledge the limitations of these measurements. With more realistic acknowledgement of such limitations, teachers and administrators should expect that the pressure of large-scale testing will be lessened enough to allow them to teach and assess student writing in ways that better support young people to participate in contemporary literacy environments. Collaborative writing, multimedia composition, and cross-cultural, multilingual writing contexts are mainstays of current participation in the social network of Web 2.0 activities (O'Reilly, 2007). Teachers who feel required to teach solely to the test cannot now teach for the real world of literacy as demonstrated in the on-line and socially networked practices of literate people.

In previous research on teaching and learning with a focus on multiliteracies, McClay (2006) found that in such classrooms, teacher and student learning is (a) both planned and improvisational, (b) contextually nuanced, and (c) social and reciprocal. These three qualities of teaching and learning with a multiliteracies focus are not compatible with the large-scale assessments as they currently stand—a point that underscores as always the importance of the individual teacher in each classroom. The teachers in these multiliteracies classrooms began planning curricular projects with a view to capitalizing on students' interests. Their deep understanding of the broad sweep of the language arts curriculum helped them put the provincial assessments, which they considered to be high stakes, into perspective. They viewed testing as part of, but not the entirety of the curriculum. For teachers with less confidence and/or teachers who work in schools that require more conformity, however, it is considerably harder to develop such perspective on the large-scale assessment.

We take heart from our analysis that shows some development of large-scale tests of student writing in terms of writing process approaches, and in particular, the use of portfolios of classroom writing in the Manitoba provincial assessment. While these developments, with the exclusion of the Manitoba assessment, do not truly honour the complex recursive nature and individuality of writing processes, we can see that efforts have been made to make the tests attend somewhat to such matters as choice, planning and revision. These efforts could certainly be increased to allow closer harmony with the actual writing practices of writers. With respect to

multiliteracies theory, Quebec test developers give the rest of Canada's test developers some productive starting points for including multiliteracies focuses in tests.

Our analysis of Canadian provincial and territorial large-scale assessments has provided an overview and comparison of the design, administration and scoring procedures in each jurisdiction across Canada. Educators, test designers and policy makers may use this analysis to gain a sense of how each province and territory conducts their large-scale assessments and how they address the need for validity by aligning classroom and large-scale writing assessment practices. We hope that our analysis will also provide starting points for conversations about future directions for large-scale provincial and territorial writing assessments. Stakeholders might deliberate on how large-scale writing assessments could align more closely with multiliteracies theory and the process writing approach and how teachers, students and parents might respond to such changes.

Test designers and policy makers should also continue to ensure that the values, needs, and perspectives of their province or territory permeate large-scale writing assessments as they take up the recommend changes in this paper. The structure of Canada's education system allows for some response to local provincial or territorial contexts, as each province has its own assessment, with the exception of the territories, which use the Alberta assessment procedures and writing prompts. We encourage Canadian large-scale assessment developers to resist the calls that are getting louder in the United States of America for greater uniformity in academic standards and assessments (e.g., Cronin, Dahlin, Adkins, & Kingsbury, 2007; Hulbert, 2007). A move to great uniformity in testing apparatus and structures would deny curriculum planners and teachers the flexibility to respond to local and regional contexts—contexts that are critical to allowing young people sufficient choice in topics, audiences, and habits in writing to fuel their continuing growth and interest in literacy.

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Appendix

Summary of Assessment Writing Principles and Multiliteracies Practices

	Time for planning	Talk with peers before writing	Feedback from teachers	Collaborative writing	Linguistic and cultural diversity	Multimodalities	Compose on computers
Newfoundland and Labrador	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	IEP only
Prince Edward Island	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	IEP only
Nova Scotia	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	IEP only
New Brunswick	No	No	No	No	No	No	IEP only
Quebec	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Ontario	No	Yes To help with directions	No	No	No	No	IEP only
Manitoba	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Saskatchewan	Yes	Yes To help with directions	No	No	Yes	No	No
Alberta, Yukon and Northwest	Yes	Yes 10 minutes in groups of two or four	No	No	No	No	Yes
British Columbia	Yes 40 minutes for long; 15 minutes for short piece	No	No	No	Yes (in suggested writing topics)	No	No