

Assessing Student Writing

By Derek Rodgers, Ph.D.

There are many ways to measure student writing. For sentences, the number of correct writing sequences (CWS) and incorrect writing sequences (IWS) students generate during a timed writing are sensitive and effective measures of student writing.

In general, CWS is a measure of grammar, punctuation, and capitalization. A student receives a CWS when two adjacent writing units (e.g., two adjacent words, one word and a piece of punctuation) are grammatically appropriate, when appropriate words (e.g., the first word in a sentence, proper nouns) are capitalized, and when a sentence ends with appropriate punctuation. An IWS is a measure of inappropriate grammar, capitalization, and punctuation. A student receives an IWS when the student's writing units do not meet the criteria for a CWS.

In these examples, a CWS will be identified with an ^ symbol, and an IWS will be identified with an x symbol.

For more information on assessing student writing fluency, read the Iowa Reading Research Center blog post ["Using Timed Practice to Promote Sentence-Writing Fluency"](#) by Dr. Derek Rodgers.

Example 1

Student sentence: My dad lyke to eight peeza

Scored: ^My^dad^xlyke^xto^eight^xpeeza^x

CWS = 3

IWS = 4

The student receives 3 CWS because the sentence begins with a capital letter, the adjacent units "My dad" are grammatically sound, and the adjacent units "to eight" are also grammatically sound. Note that although "to eight" does not make sense within the context of this sentence, it is a grammatically sound phrase that could be used in other sentences (e.g., The quiz took about five to eight minutes). It also would be acceptable for a teacher to give an IWS for this adjacent unit. The key is to remain consistent with your scoring practices.

The student receives 4 IWS. The word "lyke" is misspelled, so the adjacent units to the right and left of "lyke" are incorrect. The word "peeza" is misspelled, so the adjacent units to the right and left of "peeza" are incorrect. In addition, the sentence does not end with a period. However, that unit has already received an IWS.

Example 2

Student sentence: I ply outsid wit frendz.

Scored: ^I^ply^outsid^wit^frendz^.

CWS = 1

IWS = 5

The student receives only 1 CWS because the sentence begins with a capital letter. The student earns 5 IWS because the other words in the sentence are misspelled. Therefore, all adjacent units to each of the words are scored with an IWS. Note that the final adjacent unit “frendz.” is awarded an IWS even though the student uses a period at the end of the sentence. The word “frendz” is misspelled; therefore, the adjacent units on both sides of it are scored as an IWS.

Example 3

Student sentence: The bare ate honnie.

Scored: ^The^bare^ate^honnie^.

CWS = 2

IWS = 3

The student receives 2 CWS. The first CWS is awarded for the sentence beginning with a capital letter, and the second CWS is awarded because the adjacent units “The bare” are grammatically sound. However, note that “The bare” is not appropriate within the context of the sentence. This is up to the discretion of the teacher, but teachers should ensure they are using consistent rules for assessing sentences.

The student receives 3 IWS. The adjacent units “bare ate” are not grammatically sound in any context. Therefore, an IWS is given. Finally, the word “honnie” is misspelled, so an IWS is given on both sides of the word.

Example 4

Student sentence: Timmy rode his bike to school.

Scored: ^Timmy^rode^his^bike^to^school^.

CWS = 7

IWS = 0

This sentence is grammatically sound, includes appropriate capitalization, and ends with punctuation. Therefore, it receives 7 CWS and 0 IWS.