

# From scribbles to paragraphs: Implementing the Developmental Writing

## Scale for students with complex learning needs

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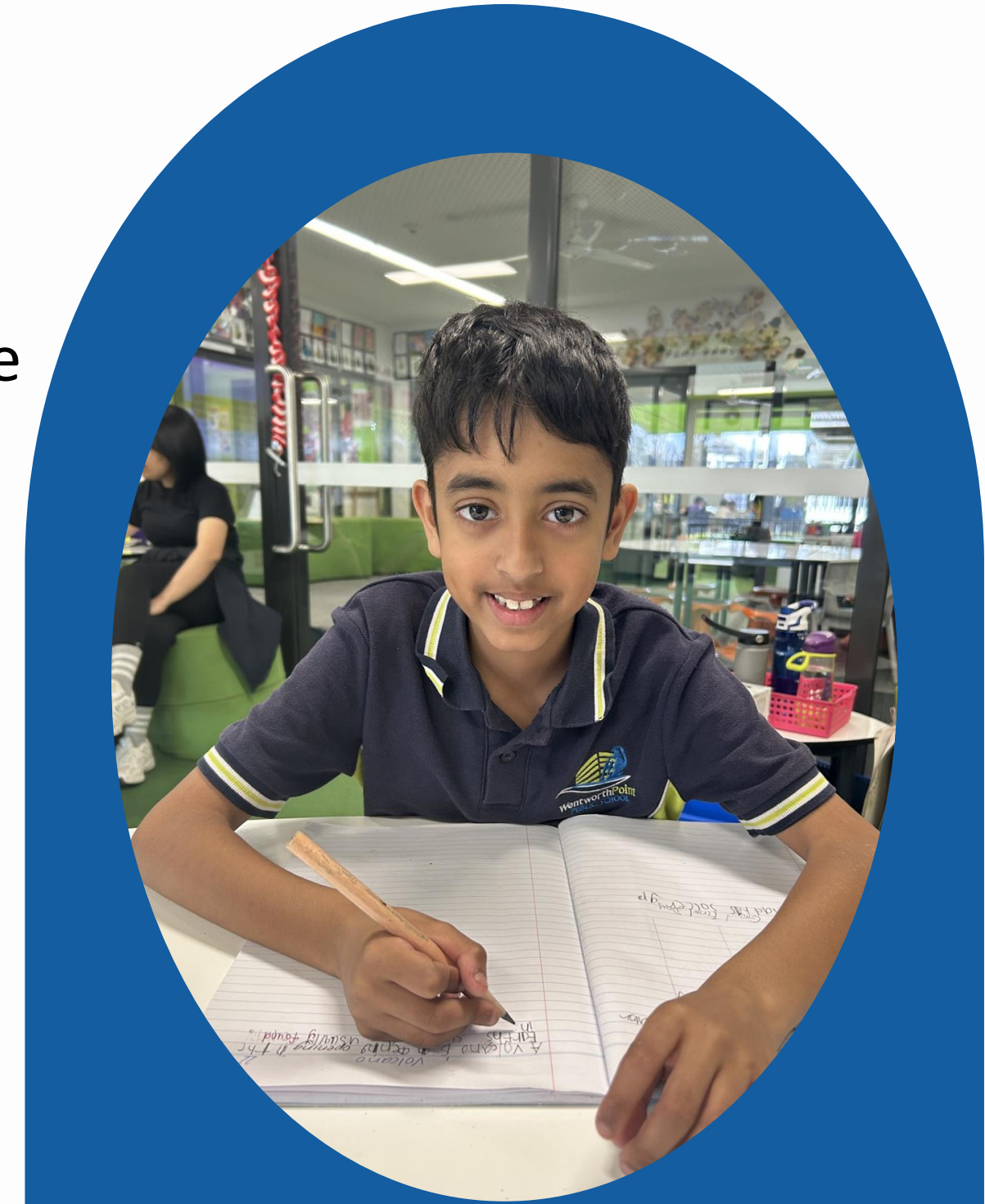
## Acknowledgement of Country



We acknowledge that we are meeting with you today from the lands of the Gadigal people. We also acknowledge the Ongoing Custodians of the various lands on which you all work and pay respect to Elders past and present and extend that respect to other Aboriginal people joining us today.

# Background

- 3 x SU classes, across K-6
- Wide range of writing abilities within each class
- Writing was challenging to program as it was not always clear where students were achieving.
- Typical assessment tasks showed that students were not making progress in writing.
- As a team we researched additional assessment tools that would provide a clearer and more consistent picture of where students were in their writing ability.



# Assessment Challenges

- Using stage-based rubrics was difficult to assess students growth.
- Rubrics did not show the small areas of growth we knew students were making.
- Needed clarity around how to move students forward, when progress was often slow.



# The Developmental Writing Scale (DWS)

- Developed by Sturm, Cali, Nelson and Staskowski in 2012
- Tool to assess and monitor writing growth for beginning writers
- Suitable for students with disabilities at all ages
- Uses a 14-point ordinal scale that defines qualitative advances in levels of writing
- Levels of a learning progression for beginning writing from scribbling to cohesive (linguistically connected) and coherent (on an identifiable topic) paragraph-level writing.

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## The Developmental Writing Scale

A New Progress Monitoring Tool  
for Beginning Writers

**Janet M. Sturm, Kathleen Cali, Nickola W. Nelson,  
and Maureen Staskowski**

Developing writers make qualitative changes in their written products as they progress from scribbling and drawing to conventional, paragraph level writing. As yet, a comprehensive measurement tool does not exist that captures the linguistic and communicative changes (not just emergent spelling) in the early stages of this progression. The Developmental Writing Scale (DWS) for beginning writers was developed as a tool that can capture evidence of refined changes in growth over time. This measure is a 14-point ordinal scale that defines qualitative advances in levels of a learning progression for beginning writing from scribbling to cohesive (linguistically connected) and coherent (on an identifiable topic) paragraph-level writing. The measure can be used with young typically developing children and children with disabilities at all ages who are functioning at beginning levels of writing. Limitations of current writing measures, in contrast to the DWS, are described. The development of the DWS and techniques for using the measure are described with regard to construct and content validity. Preliminary research on reliability of DWS scoring and validity for 5 purposes support usefulness of the DWS for educational and research purposes, including monitoring the progress of beginning writers with significant disabilities.  
**Key words:** *beginning writers, learning progression, writing assessment, writing scale*

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Portions of the Developmental Writing Scale were developed when the first author, as PI, was receiving support from NIH Grant R41HD059238-01 to Don Johnston, Inc. for development of software to support early writing development. The authors would like to thank the many teachers, undergraduate, and graduate students for their ongoing support during the development of the Developmental Writing Scale.

The authors disclose that they may receive royalties in the future for products based on the work described in this article.

Supplemental digital content is available for this article. Direct URL citations appear in the printed text and are provided in the HTML and PDF versions of this article on the journal's Web site ([www.topicsinlanguageorders.com](http://www.topicsinlanguageorders.com)).

SROD UF DEF POT 1. Hir 1 wbs sentn din rind.  
SROD UF DEF POT 1. (Grade 5 student)

My role model is my dad because he waled on tools, mosbens, and matel baerols. I think it's verey intuorasting to do because I like to fix tbing's, and it's fun to do waleding. (Grade 8 student)

Pow Pow Pow, I think it would be a good idea for teachers to have a gun permit. It would reduce violence in schools and outside of schools. It will also protect themselves as well as the students. I think it would be a great idea for it. (Grade 11 student)

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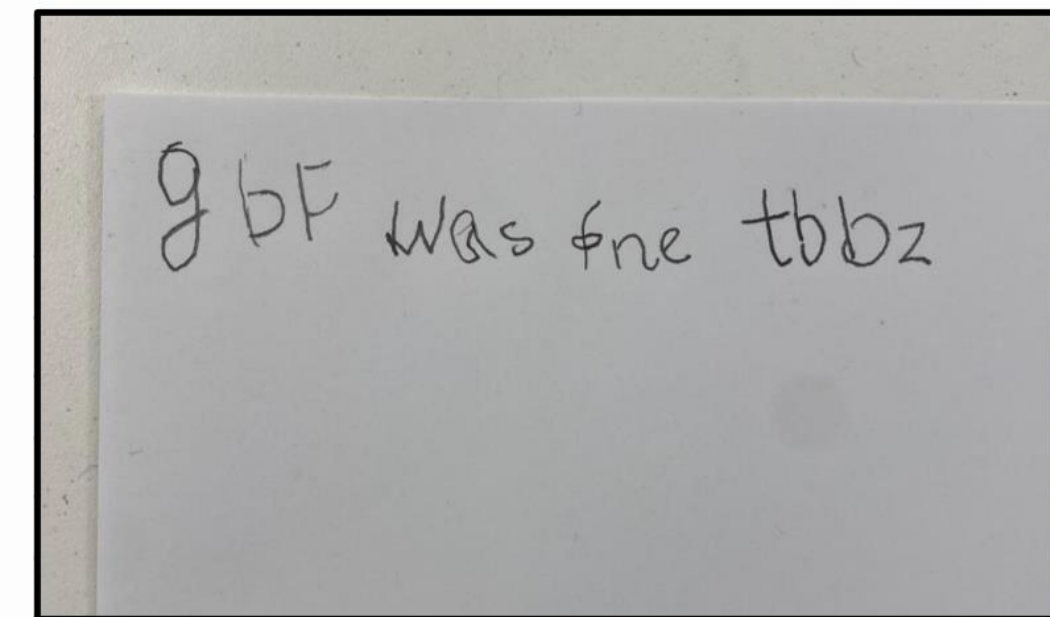
## Levels 1-8

Level	
1	Drawing only
2	Scribble writing which may include letter-like forms but with the majority of shapes not recognizable as letters
3	Some recognizable letters in strings but not grouped into words
4	Strings of letters grouped into "words" (i.e., with spaces between at least two groups of letters) but with no intelligible words
5	Strings of letters grouped into "words," with only one possible real word (i.e., two or more letters in length) set apart, written repeatedly (e.g., dog, dog, dog), or embedded in a string of letters
6	Two to three different intelligible words embedded in strings, separated by spaces, or in a list format
7	More than three different intelligible words in a list format
8	More than three different intelligible words, with at least two of them in a partially formed sentence (i.e., grammatically related parts of a phrase, clause or sentence)



IHKYL DIABEUM  
K BHLUUBLHHmhris

Level 3

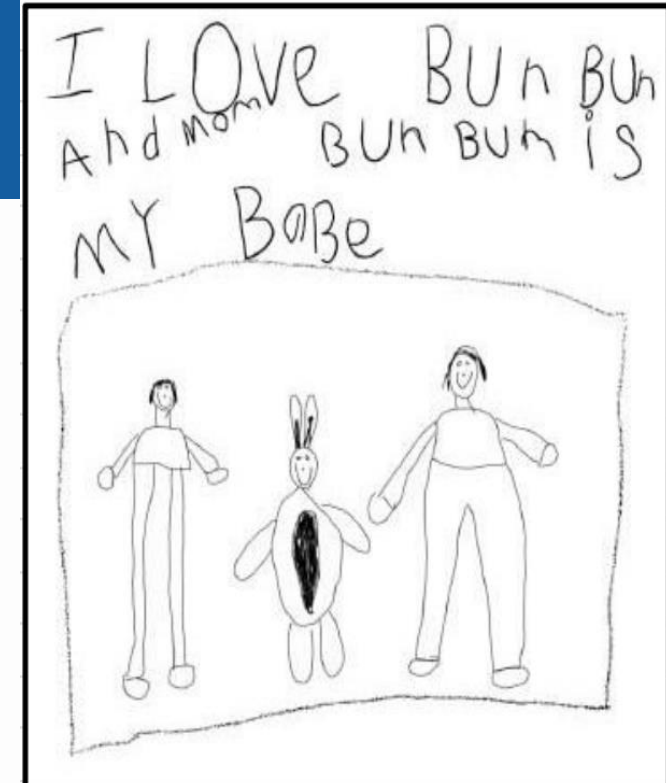


g bf was fine tbbz

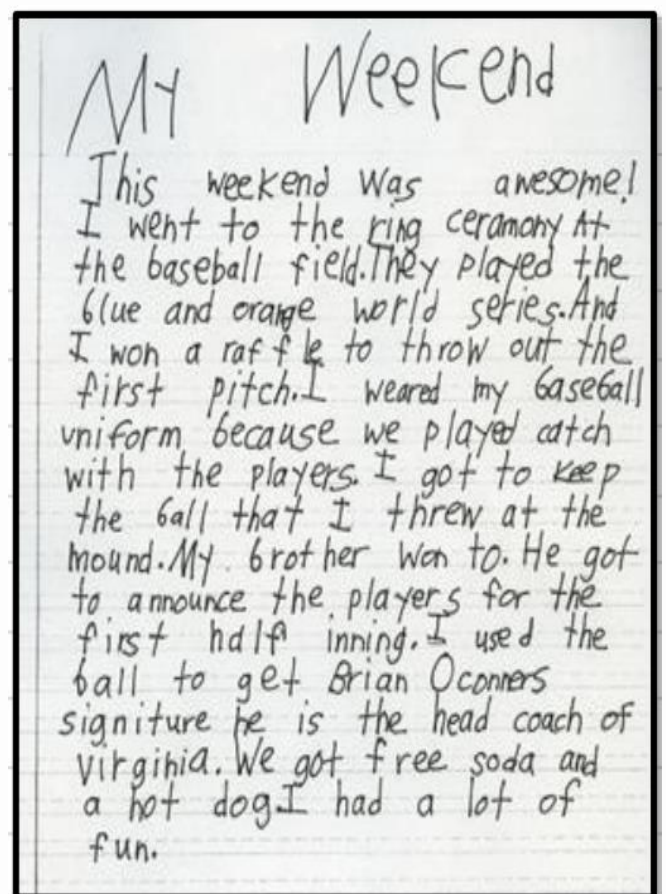
Level 7

## Levels 9-14

Level	
9	One to two complete sentences with a subject phrase and a verb phrase
10	A minimum of three sentences, but with no coherent topic (i.e., most sentences are not related)
11	Organized writing with three or more sentences on a coherent topic but with limited cohesion between sentences (i.e., sentences can be reordered without changing meaning)
12	Organized writing with a coherent topic (i.e., on a consistent theme) and use of cohesive devices (e.g., pronoun or synonym replacement, logical connectors, subordinating conjunctions, conclusions that refer to prior content) across three or more sentences, so that sentences cannot be reordered without changing meaning
13	Organized writing with a coherent main topic and 2 cohesive subsections (sub-topics or story parts) with at least two sentences elaborating the meaning of each
14	Organized writing with a coherent main topic and at least 3 cohesive subsections (sub-topics or story parts) with at least two sentences elaborating the meaning of each

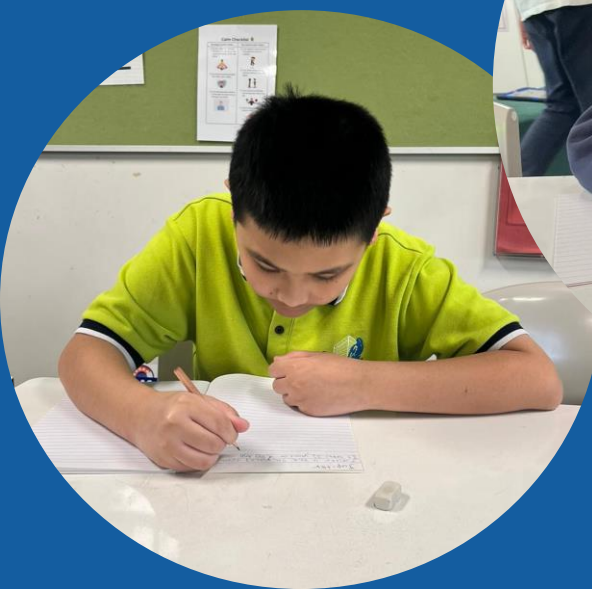


Level 9



Level 12

## Implementing the DWS

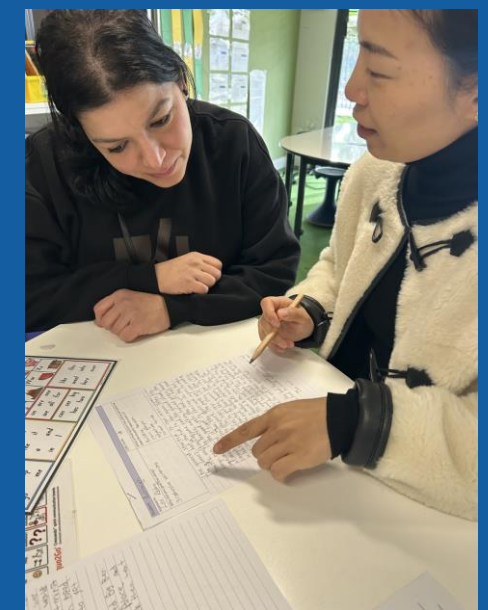
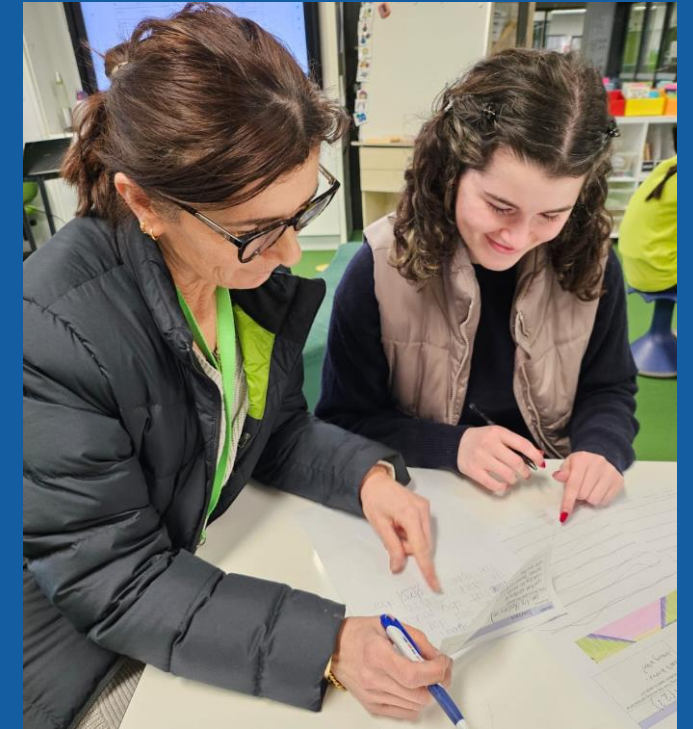


- Each term students complete an unassisted writing assessment
- Staff come together to moderate work samples
- Student growth is tracked and displayed on a bump it up wall
- Learning goals are formed and shared with students
- Influences groupings during writing lessons to provide targeted staff support



# Scoring and Moderation

- In general, the score assigned to the sample is the one that best fits the description at a particular level.
- If there is a debate between two levels, **assign the lower level** being considered.
- The score should focus on the nature of the student's writing (or prewriting) and not the spatial placement of text on a page (e.g., paragraph spacing, indentation, or margins). The concepts of word, sentence, and paragraph represented in this scale are meant to be primarily linguistic in nature. Look beyond technical accuracy when assigning scores.




# Continued

- If a student produces one large paragraph, examination may reveal that three cohesive and coherent subsections are present and a Level 14 is the best score;
- Another student might have a true word (e.g., the) embedded within random letters. This student would be assigned a Level 5. If the same word is repeated in a list format (e.g., dog, dog, dog) the student also would be assigned a Level 5.
- Student names at the top of the page (denoting who wrote it) are not counted; however, student names in the body of the text are scored on the scale.
- Consider their judgement of word intelligibility
- Scoring should be based on the messages that can be gleaned by a remote audience assessing the writing only, and not oral or gestural communication.

# Sample 1- Sakchyam

h SAKRC Name: NAR Sakchyam

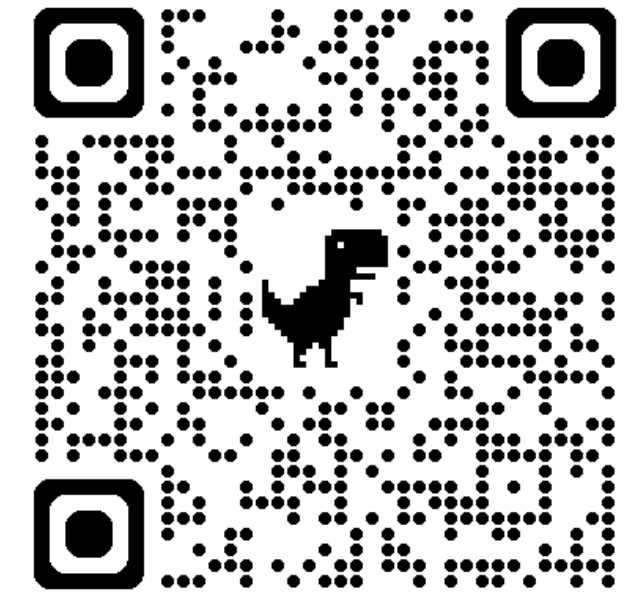


y a l A

BARKCHYAM

BINGOSS24

↑ slide



Scan me to  
access the  
samples


# Sample 1- Sakchyam

Level 6

WTN: Write three or more words on a topic.

Wrote 2-3 recognisable words: 'Sakchyam' and 'bingo.'

h SAKRC Name: NARR Sakchyam

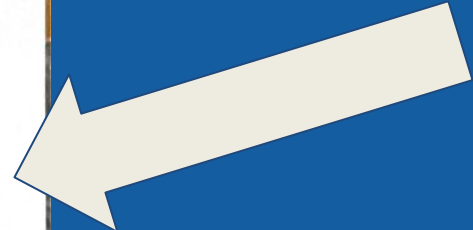


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BAKCHYAM

BINGO SS24


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Not all words are related

# Sample 2- Jasper

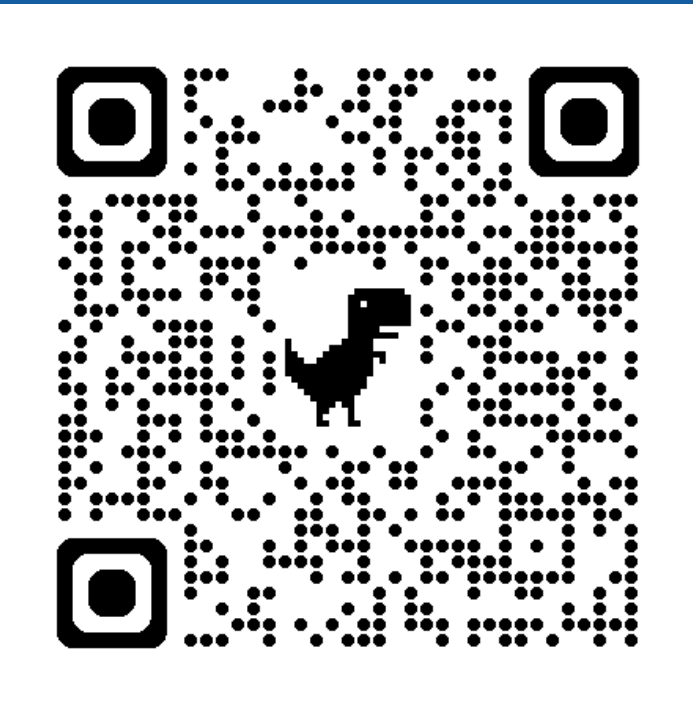
Name: Jasper



Handwritten scribbles on lined paper:

Handwritten text at the bottom: Wish

Pencil used (circle one or more):  handwriting  standard keyboard  adapted keyboard  alphabet flip chart  AAC device  other:




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samples

# Sample 2- Jasper

Level 2

Name: Jasper



Handwriting practice lines showing a child's attempt to write. The first line contains a clear 'w' and some scribbles. The second line contains a 'w' and several circular scribbles. The third line contains a large, complex scribble. The fourth line contains a 'w' and some scribbles. The fifth line contains a 'w' and some scribbles. The sixth line contains a 'w' and some scribbles.

Pencil used (circle one or more):  handwriting  standard keyboard  adapted keyboard  alphabet flip chart  AAC device  other:

Letter like forms,  
can see a clear  
'w'

circular or wavy  
lines arranged  
linearly across the  
page

most shapes not  
recognisable as letters

WTN: Say a sentence  
and write my ideas  
using letters

# Sample 3- Shivam

shivam

Jubilee 19/06/2024

It's a beautiful day in London  
the guards wait for the queen  
-inst and her dog to go in the royal carriage  
but the Queen's hat gets flown  
off her one of the guards and the  
dog run to get it. The hat flies  
above a crowd, goes across the road  
goes to a homeless person, then the  
guard gets it but it gets flown away  
by a bus.

middle The hat then goes to a smoker and  
to a flower garden, the guard  
tries to get the hat by using  
the corgi but the wind picks it  
up and then goes on a pink balloon  
the girl who is holding the balloon  
gets shocked then lets go it.

end The balloon head up to Big Ben  
and pops the hat gets stuck on  
the big clock, the guard and the  
corgi wait and the guard has  
some tea. After the guard has  
finished his tea he went up to  
Big Ben and sacrificed himself  
to get it but he messed up the  
time and then the hat fell down,  
then the corgi got it and they went  
back to the palace. The Queen then  
approached the carriage.



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samples

# Sample 3- Shivam

Level 14

3 coherent paragraphs

sentences are cohesive

Shivam  
Jubilee 19/06/2024

It's a beautiful day in London  
the guards wait for the queen  
and her dog to go in the royal carriage but the Queen's hat gets flown off her one of the guards and the dog run to get it. The hat flies above a crowd, goes across the road goes to a homeless person, then the guard gets it but it gets flown away by a bus.

The hat then goes to a smoker and to a flower garden, the guard tries to get the hat by using the corgi but the wind picks it up and then goes on a pink balloon the girl who is holding the balloon gets shocked then lets go it.

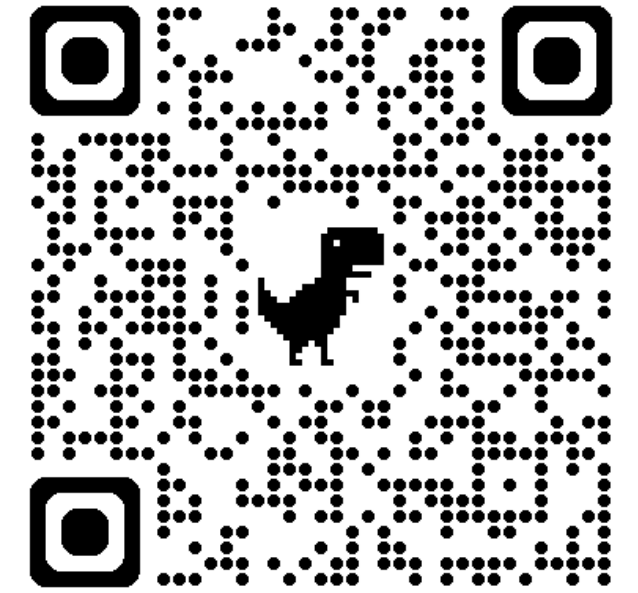
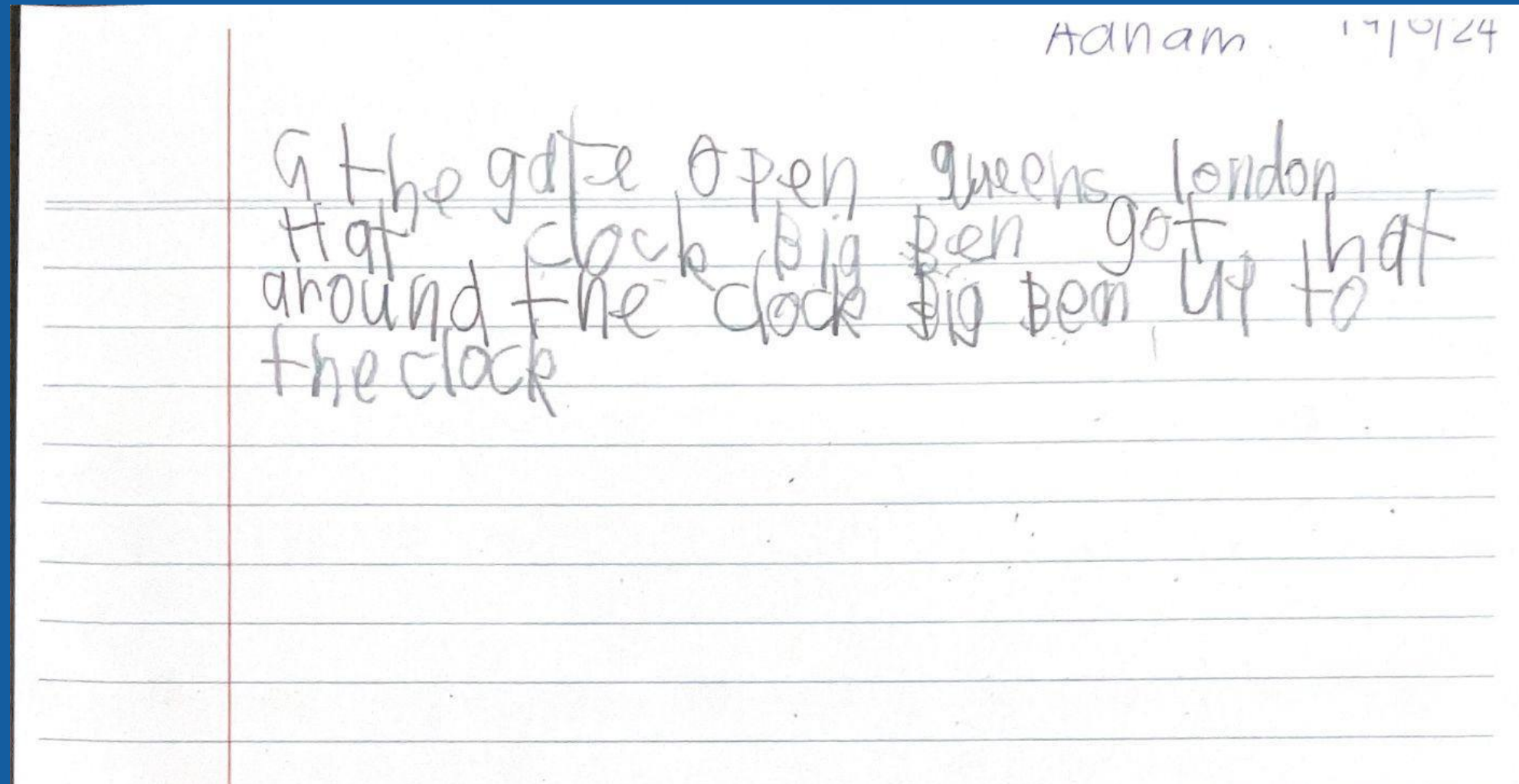
The balloon head up to Big Ben and pops the hat gets stuck on the big clock, the guard and the corgi wait and the guard has some tea. After the guard has finished his tea he went up to Big Ben and sacrificed himself to get it but he messed up the time and then the hat fell down, then the corgi got and they went back to the palace. The Queen then approached the carriage.

elaborates on some key points

WTN: Write shorter sentences. Spend time reviewing and editing.



# Sample 4- Adham



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samples

# Sample 4- Adham

Level 8

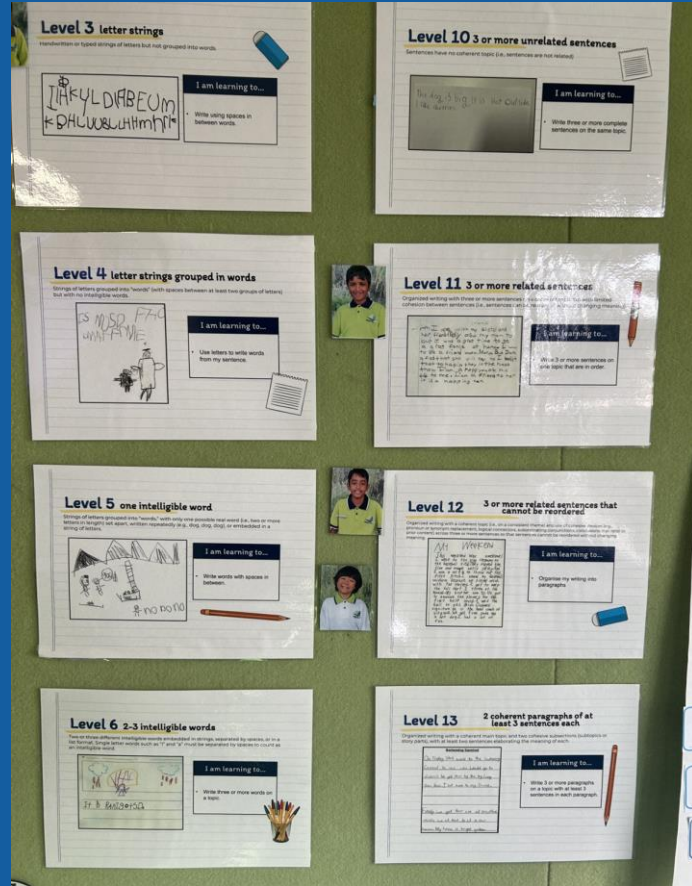
Adnam. 17/0/24

At the gate open queens london  
that clock big ben got that  
around the clock big ben, up to  
the clock

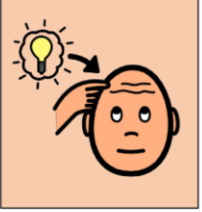
partial sentences  
only  
'the gate open'  
'up to the clock'

WTN: 1-2 complete  
sentences.


# How have we used the data?




**I am learning to:**



Still learning



Almost there



I did it!

**This looks like:**

**Wentworth Point Public School**  
2024 - Semester 1

Report for:  
Year 3 - Class Funnel-webs  
Miss Huggett

**Report Overview**  
Schools report on the six Key Learning Areas of English; Mathematics; Creative Arts; Human Society and Its Environment (which include History and Geography); Personal Development, Health and Physical Education; and Science and Technology.  
Reports provide feedback on individual student learning progress that supports parents/ carers to understand how their child is progressing and what can be done to support their learning growth. Our school reports on your child's progress with written reports twice per year and through interviews or meetings.  
This report indicates achievement against a personalised learning program.

**Personalised Learning Program**

Achievement	Grade	Achievement Description
Beginning	P1	The student has some existing prior knowledge and/or necessary pre-skills for the task. The student is beginning to participate in a task with maximum teacher assistance. The student uses skills and knowledge in a single setting.
Occasional	P2	The student understands information, concept and/or can perform skill. The student often relies on physical or verbal assistance when participating in a task. The student has begun to demonstrate the skills in selected, familiar settings.
Frequent	P3	The student relies on partial prompts to complete a task. The student can regularly perform the skill or demonstrate knowledge. The student uses the skills or knowledge in a variety of familiar settings and situations.
Independent	P4	The student can complete a task independently, without assistance. The student maintains the skill or knowledge over time. The student generalises the skill or knowledge to new settings, people or materials.

**English as an Additional Language/Dialect**

Consolidating	Students at the Consolidating phase have a sound knowledge of oral and written English. Their use and understanding of English enables them to be active and increasingly independent participants in classroom learning and across the school.
Developing	Students at the Developing phase can engage in conversation in English and have a developing knowledge of print literacy in English. They are active participants in the classroom learning and school routines. Their English proficiency allows the learner to engage with curriculum content with confidence.
Emerging	Students at the Emerging phase have simple oral and written English language. These learners understand and participate in classroom behaviours and school routines. At this phase students rely on teacher assistance to clarify and consolidate curriculum content.
Beginning	Students at the Beginning phase are starting to learn English. They are starting to engage with simple language tasks of the curriculum. Students are often very reliant on visual support and gesture to understand teacher instructions and curriculum content.

Development and use of Bump it Up Wall

Organised students into writing groups based on their DWS level.

Provide students with writing goals using self-assessment checklist.

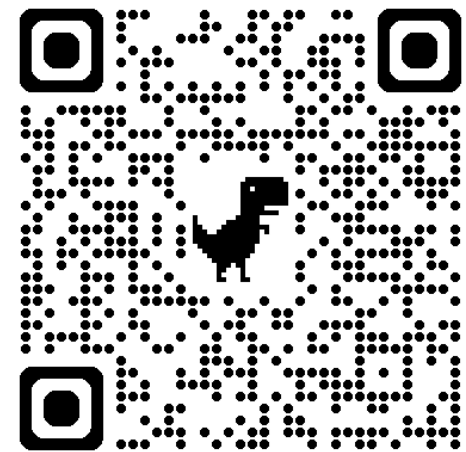
Use information for school reporting, handover documents and annual student reviews.

# Questions?



# Contact Us

Feel free to contact us via email:  
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[amy.huggett1@det.nsw.edu.au](mailto:amy.huggett1@det.nsw.edu.au)



Links to today's resources including a copy of the presentation and DWS article can be found here.