

Assessing Writing

Sara Cushing Weigle

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To my family: Clarke, Tommy, and James

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Series Editors' Preface

Writing, which was once considered the domain of the elite and well-educated, has become an essential tool for people of all walks of life in today's global community. Whether used in reporting analyses of current events for newspapers or web pages, composing academic essays, business reports, letters, or e-mail messages, the ability to write effectively allows individuals from different cultures and backgrounds to communicate. Furthermore, it is now widely recognized that writing plays a vital role not only in conveying information, but also in transforming knowledge to create new knowledge. It is thus of central importance to students in academic and second language programs throughout the world. In many of these settings, the assessment of writing ability is of critical importance. Employers, academic instructors and writing teachers need to make decisions about potential employees and students, based on how well they can communicate in writing. But while the history of writing assessment goes back for centuries, it continues to be one of the most problematic areas of language use to assess. This is partly because of the vast diversity of writing purposes, styles, and genres, but primarily because of the subjectivity of the judgements involved in assessing samples of writing.

The author of this book, Dr. Sara Cushing Weigle, has extensive experience in teaching and assessing writing, and has conducted seminal research in this area. Her doctoral dissertation on writing assessment was awarded the TOEFL Award for Outstanding Doctoral Dissertation in Second/Foreign Language Testing in 1996, and she has since published numerous research studies in this area. Furthermore, her experience as a teacher has enabled her to present the complexities of writing assessment research and practice in a way that is readily accessible to practitioners and researchers alike.

This book provides a coverage of writing assessment that is both broad and in-depth, discussing the relevant research and theory, and addressing practical considerations in the design, development and use of writing assessments. Beginning with a discussion of the nature of writing as both a social and cognitive activity, the author offers a thorough and critical review of the relevant research and theories of writing ability that provides the grounding for the rest of the book. She then proposes a conceptual framework for designing and developing writing assessments. In subsequent chapters, the author provides detailed discussions of procedures for designing writing assessment tasks and of scoring procedures, in the contexts of both large-scale and classroom assessment, illustrating her main points throughout with examples from a wide range of writing assessments. She devotes an entire chapter to an approach to assessment – portfolio assessment – that is both controversial and widely used, not only for writing assessment, but also for large-scale assessment of educational achievement. In her final chapter, the author looks ahead to examine the effects of technology on writing itself, and on writing pedagogy, as well as the potential contributions of new technologies to writing assessment. She also considers the politics of writing assessment, and the on-going tensions among different stakeholders about the nature of writing assessment, the ways in which these should be scored and interpreted, and the kinds of evidence that need to be provided to support the validity of the inferences and uses we make of the results of writing assessments.

In summary, this book provides a thorough discussion of practical issues and procedures in the design, development and use of writing assessments that is solidly grounded in research and theory. It thus has much to offer to both the test developer and the classroom teacher.

J. Charles Alderson
Lyle F. Bachman

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In the summer of 1996, at the Language Testing Research Colloquium in Tampere, Finland, Lyle Bachman and Charles Alderson asked me if I would be interested in contributing a book on writing assessment to the new CUP series on language testing. In the ensuing five years I gave birth to my second child, moved with my family from Los Angeles to Atlanta to start a new job, bought a house, rejoiced with my much-loved father when he found and married the woman of his dreams, and mourned with my new stepmother a year later when Dad was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and passed away. All the while Lyle and Charles, along with Mickey Bonin of Cambridge University Press, waited patiently for me to complete this manuscript and never gave up hope that I would eventually complete it. Now that it is finally finished, I need first of all to thank Lyle, Charles, and Mickey for their patience and unwavering support. I am also grateful for their guidance and feedback at every stage of the process. Lyle in particular has been willing to read and comment in detail on many drafts of each chapter, and I would like to acknowledge his many contributions to the book.

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Atlanta, September 2001

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The ability to write effectively is becoming increasingly important in our global community, and instruction in writing is thus assuming an increasing role in both second- and foreign-language education. As advances in transportation and technology allow people from nations and cultures throughout the world to interact with each other, communication across languages becomes ever more essential. As a result, the ability to speak and write a second language is becoming widely recognized as an important skill for educational, business, and personal reasons. Writing has also become more important as tenets of communicative language teaching – that is, teaching language as a system of communication rather than as an object of study – have taken hold in both second- and foreign-language settings. The traditional view in language classes that writing functions primarily to support and reinforce patterns of oral language use, grammar, and vocabulary, is being supplanted by the notion that writing in a second language is a worthwhile enterprise in and of itself.

Wherever the acquisition of a specific language skill is seen as important, it becomes equally important to test that skill, and writing is no exception. Thus, as the role of writing in second-language education increases, there is an ever greater demand for valid and reliable ways to test writing ability, both for classroom use and as a predictor of future professional or academic success.

What does it mean to test writing ability? A common-sense answer to this question is that “the best way to test people’s writing ability is to get them to write” (Hughes, 1989: 75). If we agree with this

statement, it follows that a test of writing involves at least two basic components: one or more writing tasks, or instructions that tell test takers what to write, and a means of evaluating the writing samples that test takers produce. However, as we shall see, designing a good test of writing involves much more than simply thinking of a topic for test takers to write about and then using our own judgement to rank order the resulting writing samples. Before we can make decisions about designing assessment tasks or scoring procedures, we need to consider a number of key questions. These questions include the following:

- What are we trying to test? That is, how are we defining writing ability for the purposes of the test – are we interested primarily in whether test takers can form grammatical sentences, or do we want to know how well they can use writing for a specific communicative function?
- Why do we want to test writing ability? What will we do with the information that we get from the test?
- Who are our test takers? What do we need to know about them in order to design tasks that allow test takers to perform at their highest ability?
- Who will score the tests, and what criteria or standards will be used? How can we ensure that raters apply the scoring standards consistently?
- Who will use the information that our test provides? In what form will the information be the most useful?
- What are the constraints (of time, materials, money, and labor) that limit the amount and kind of information we can collect about test takers' writing ability?
- What do we need to know about testing to make our test valid and reliable?

This book attempts to outline answers to these questions, and is organized in the following way. The rest of Chapter 1 provides an introduction to writing assessment by considering, first of all, the reasons why people use writing in second-language contexts, and second, the types of writing texts people are likely to need to write in a second language, both inside and outside the language classroom. The introduction is followed by an overview of writing assessment in

both first and second languages, comprising two chapters. Chapter 2, *The Nature of Writing Ability*, reviews literature from the fields of composition, applied linguistics, and psychology to discuss the nature of writing ability and the connections between writing and other language skills, particularly speaking and reading. Chapter 3, *Basic Considerations in Assessing Writing*, reviews the purposes for testing writing in a variety of settings for various populations, and discusses principles for evaluating test usefulness (Bachman and Palmer, 1996).

Chapters 4 through 7 deal with what has been traditionally called direct testing of writing, particularly for large-scale assessment: timed writing on a topic not known to test takers in advance. Chapter 4 reviews a large body of research on writing assessment, looking at writing tasks, rating scales, raters, and texts. Chapter 5 presents information and advice on designing tasks for writing assessment, and Chapter 6 discusses scoring procedures. Chapter 7 provides an in-depth discussion of a number of writing tests for a variety of contexts.

The final three chapters deal with topics in writing assessment that go beyond the traditional timed impromptu writing test. Chapter 8 discusses classroom evaluation of writing, looking at options for responding to and evaluating student writing at various stages of the writing process, from pre-writing through to a polished, final text. Chapter 9 discusses portfolio assessment, or the assessment of writing ability by collecting and evaluating a number of texts written at different times and for different audiences and purposes. Finally, Chapter 10 looks towards the future, discussing unresolved issues and future directions in second-language writing assessment.

Writing in first- and second-language contexts

Before we can discuss how to test writing, we must start by attempting to define what we mean by **writing ability**. As we will see, however, this is not a simple task, since, as researchers in both first- and second-language writing have pointed out, the uses to which writing is put by different people in different situations are so varied that no single definition can cover all situations (Purves, 1992; Camp, 1993; White, 1995). For example, the ability to write down exactly what someone else says (an important skill for a stenographer) is quite different from the ability to write a persuasive argument. For

second-language learners, learning to write may mean anything from attempting to master the most commonly used Chinese characters to being able to write a dissertation for a Ph.D. Instead of attempting an all-encompassing definition, then, it may be more useful to begin by delineating the situations in which people learn and use second languages in general and second-language writing in particular, and the types of writing that are likely to be relevant for second-language writers.

Perhaps the best way to begin to appreciate the complexities in L2 writing is to contrast it with L1 writing. As Vähäpääsi (1982), Leki (1992) and others have pointed out, first language writing is inextricably linked to formal education. While virtually all children are able to speak their native language when they begin school, writing must be explicitly taught. Furthermore, in comparison to speaking, listening, and reading, writing outside of school settings is relatively rare, and extensive public writing (that is, writing beyond the sentence or paragraph level and intended for an audience other than oneself or one's close associates) is reserved for those employed in specialized careers such as education, law, or journalism.

In first-language settings, the ability to write well has a very close relationship to academic and professional success. Grabowski (1996) notes that:

Writing, as compared to speaking, can be seen as a more standardized system which must be acquired through special instruction. Mastery of this standard system is an important prerequisite of cultural and educational participation and the maintenance of one's rights and duties . . . The fact that writing is more standardized than speaking allows for a higher degree of sanctions when people deviate from that standard.

(Grabowski, 1996: 75)

Thus, in first-language education, learning to write involves learning a specialized version of a language already known to students. This specialized language differs in important ways from spoken language, both in form and in use, as we shall see in Chapter 2, but builds upon linguistic resources that students already possess. The ultimate goal of learning to write is, for most students, to be able to participate fully in many aspects of society beyond school, and for some, to pursue careers that involve extensive writing.

The value of being able to write effectively increases as students progress through compulsory education on to higher education. At

the university level in particular, writing is seen not just as a standardized system of communication but also as an essential tool for learning. At least in the English-speaking world, one of the main functions of writing at higher levels of education is to expand one's own knowledge through reflection rather than simply to communicate information (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987; Purves *et al.*, 1984). Writing and critical thinking are seen as closely linked, and expertise in writing is seen as an indication that students have mastered the cognitive skills required for university work. Or, to phrase it somewhat more negatively, a perceived lack of writing expertise is frequently seen as a sign that students do not possess the appropriate thinking and reasoning skills that they need to succeed. In first-language writing instruction, therefore, particularly in higher education, a great deal of emphasis is placed on originality of thought, the development of ideas, and the soundness of the writer's logic. Conventions of language (voice, tone, style, accuracy, mechanics) are important as well, but frequently these are seen as secondary matters, to be addressed after matters of content and organization.

While the specific goals of writing instruction may vary from culture to culture (see Saari and Purves, 1992, for an overview of mother-tongue and language education internationally), it is clear that writing is an important part of the curriculum in schools from the earliest grades onward, and that most children in countries that have a formal education system will learn to write, at least at a basic level, in that setting. In this sense, we can say that first language writing instruction is relatively standardized within a particular culture.

In contrast, the same cannot be said of second-language writing because of the wide variety of situations in which people learn and use second languages, both as children and as adults, in schools and in other settings. We can distinguish between at least five main groups of second-language learners, as shown in Table 1.1 (adapted from Bernhardt, 1991). The first group consists of children from a minority language group receiving their education in the majority language. These children need to learn to read and write in a language that is not spoken in their home in order to succeed in school and ultimately in the workplace. A second group of children are majority language speakers in immersion programs or otherwise learning a second language in school. In this case, mastery of the second language enhances their education but is not critical to ultimate

Table 1.1 *Groups of second language learners (adapted from Bernhardt, 1991)*

	Learners	Needs	Purpose
Children	minority group members; e.g. in bilingual programs	academic 'school' writing skills	for survival
	majority group members; e.g. in immersion programs		for enhancement
Adults	minority group members, immigrant status	immediate functional literacy skills	for survival in the workplace
	quasi-temporary academic status		for advanced subject matter degrees
	majority language group members; e.g. traditional foreign-language learners	academic 'educated' language skills	for educational and/or job enhancement and/or interest

educational success, in contrast to the first group. A common factor for both groups of children is that their first language is still developing, and that, like first-language writers, writing is very much a school-based and school-oriented activity.

There are also three distinct groups of adult second-language learners. The first group consists of immigrants to a new country, who are frequently from a lower-prestige language background and may or may not be literate in their first language. For these learners, writing at a basic functional level is essential for survival in the workplace. In marked contrast to this group is a second group of adults: those who have left their home countries to seek an advanced university degree. These adults are already highly educated and literate in their first language, and their writing needs are very sophisticated. Finally, there is a third group of L2 learners: majority language group members who are learning a second language for personal interest and/or career or educational enhancement. Like the second group, this third group is generally well educated; unlike the second group, however, they may not have as great a need to write in their second language, and

certainly the writing that they will do is less complex and demanding than that of the second group.

To summarize, then, groups of second-language learners can be distinguished by age, by level of education and first-language literacy, and by the real-world need for writing outside of the classroom. In addition to these factors, the ability and opportunity to write in a second language are also determined by other considerations. One important factor is the stage or level of acquisition of the second language. This factor will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2; for the present, we will simply note that one cannot write in a second language without knowing at least something about the grammar and vocabulary of that language. An additional factor is the relative similarity or difference between the two languages: writing in a language that is closely related to one's native language in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and writing system is clearly easier than writing in a language that is vastly different. Finally, an important consideration, which is related to the real-world need for writing discussed above, is the role of the second language as a language of wider communication: someone learning English as a foreign language will probably have more realistic needs for writing in that language than someone learning Russian, for example.

As this discussion has shown, then, the differences between first- and second-language writing are considerable, and in particular the variety of backgrounds, experience, needs, and purposes for writing is much greater for second-language writers than for first-language writers. As we shall see later on in this book, this variety has important implications for the testing of writing, both in terms of designing appropriate writing tasks and in terms of evaluating writing.

Classification of written text types

One important implication of the variety of background, experience, and needs of second-language writers is that the types of writing produced by these different groups vary considerably as well. To continue our discussion of what is meant by writing ability, then, we will now turn to another question: What do people write, and under what circumstances? As discussed above, writing can be understood as meaning anything from forming letters to writing extended discourse. What kinds of writing are relevant for which groups of second-

Table 1.2 General model of writing discourse (Vähäpääsi, 1982)

Dominant Intention/ Purpose	Cognitive Processing		I REPRODUCE		II ORGANIZE/REORGANIZE		III INVENT/GENERATE	
	Primary Audience	Primary Content	Linguistically precoded/ Predetermined Information		Spatial/ Temporal		Spatial/ Temporal	
1. To learn (metalingual mathetic)	Self		Copying Taking dictation		Retell a story (heard or read)		Comments on book margins Metaphors Analogies	
2. To convey emotions, feelings (emotive)	Self Others		Stream of consciousness		Personal story Personal diary Personal letter		Reflective writing - Personal essays	
3. To inform (referential)	Others		Quote Fill in a form		Narrative report News Instruction Telegram Announcement Circular		Expository writing - Definition - Academic essay/article - Book review - Commentary	

4. To convince, persuade (conative)	Others	Citation from authority/expert	Letter of application Statement of personal views, opinions	Advertisement Letter or advice	Argumentative/ persuasive writing - Editorial - Critical essay/article	under one or more
5. To entertain, delight, please (poetic)	Others	Quotation of poetry and prose	Given an ending - create a story Create an ending Retell a story	Word portrait or sketch Cause/le	Entertainment writing - Parody - Rhymes	of these four purposes.
6. To keep in touch (phatic)	Others	Postcards	Postcards, letters			
	DOCUMENTATIVE DISCOURSE		REPORTORIAL DISCOURSE		EXPLORATORY DISCOURSE	

language writers? If we are going to have a generalized model of second language writing that covers all five groups of second-language writers, it is important to have a system for describing and categorizing writing text types in terms of their most important characteristics.

One useful model of writing discourse was originally laid out by Vähäpääsi (1982) for an international study of school writing. This model is reproduced here as Table 1.2.

As the table shows, text types can be categorized along two major dimensions: cognitive processing, and dominant intention or purpose. Along the horizontal axis, three fundamental levels of cognitive processing can be distinguished. The least demanding task is to reproduce information that has already been linguistically encoded or determined (Type I). Examples of writing at this level would be taking dictation or filling in a form. The next level of cognitive processing, organizing, involves arranging or organizing information that is known to the writer (Type II). An example of this type of writing would be a laboratory report. Finally, the most demanding level of cognitive processing involves inventing or generating new ideas or information, as in expository writing (Type III). It is this third type of writing – writing for knowledge transforming – that is seen as most critical in academic writing for first-language writers, and for second-language writers in academic settings, as discussed above.

Along the vertical axis, Vähäpääsi lists six different dominant intentions or purposes, following a scheme originally proposed by Jakobson (1960). These purposes are to learn, to convey emotions, to inform, to convince or persuade, to entertain/delight, and to keep in touch. Note that, unlike the cognitive demands, there is no implied hierarchy among these purposes – that is, the ability to achieve one of these functions does not depend on the ability to do others, even though it may be argued that persuading is more difficult than informing, for example. Along with these purposes, there is also consideration of the primary audience, either self or others. Written texts can thus be placed into the grid created by the intersection of these two axes.

While this categorization was intended originally for school writing, it may be useful to return to the five groups of second-language writers described above and map their typical writing needs onto this grid (see Table 1.3). The first two groups – children being schooled in their second language – will need any or all of these writing types, depending on their level of schooling and the specific demands of the

Table 1.3 *Groups of second-language writers and types of writing (adapted from Bernhardt, 1991)*

Learners		Needs	Purpose	Type of writing
Children	minority group members; e.g. in bilingual programs	academic 'school' writing skills	for survival	I, II, III
	majority group members; e.g. in immersion programs		for enhancement	I, II, III
Adults	minority group members, immigrant status	immediate literacy skills	for survival in the workplace	I, II
	quasi-temporary academic status	academic 'educated' language skills	for advanced subject matter degrees	I, II, III
	majority language group members; e.g. traditional foreign-language learners		for educational and/or job enhancement and/or interest	I, II

curriculum. For students nearing the end of compulsory education and intending to go on to higher education, Type III writing takes on greater importance. Similarly, those who are pursuing advanced degrees in a second-language environment will also need to write across all three levels of cognitive processing, with writing to inform and writing to persuade of particular importance for this group of second-language writers.

On the other hand, for the other two groups of adult second-language learners – minority language group members writing for survival, and majority language group members writing for personal enhancement – the need for writing will be much more restricted, both inside and outside the classroom. Looking first at the language classroom, the predominant use of writing for both groups tends to

be Type I writing, with the dominant function of learning. As mentioned previously, the traditional role of writing in a language classroom, especially for those near or at the beginning of their language studies, is to support and reinforce the learning of oral communication of knowledge about the structure and vocabulary of the language. This is particularly the case for foreign-language learners; second-language learners in the first group have a greater and more immediate need for basic writing, and instruction for these students thus tends to include more writing earlier on of the 'survival' type, such as writing one's name and address and filling out basic forms. Within the language classroom, other types of writing may be used, although for most second-language learners in these two categories these will be restricted to the first two levels of cognitive demands.

Looking beyond the language classroom to the real-world writing needs of these two groups, it is easy to imagine that the first group – immigrants in an L2 environment – may have some use for informational (referential) writing – for example, filling in forms, writing a narrative report of a workplace accident, or writing instructions. One might also imagine some use for connative (persuasive) writing; for example, writing a letter of application for a job. For the second group, foreign-language learners, there may be even less necessity for real-world writing, depending on their personal and professional goals, and on the usefulness of the second language as an international means of communication. For an English speaker learning a language such as Italian, for example, it may be satisfying to be able to write to a hotel in Rome for reservations, yet one could easily accomplish the same goal by writing in English. For the native speaker of Italian learning English, on the other hand, it is much more likely that knowing how to write in English will be practically useful in a real-life situation.

To summarize, it is clear from the above discussion that the writing needs of different groups of second-language learners are quite varied in terms of both cognitive demands and communicative function. In developing appropriate writing tests for these different populations, then, it will be important to keep these differences in mind.

Summary

In this chapter, we have begun thinking about writing assessment by looking at different groups of second-language learners and the role that writing plays in their second language. In the next chapter, we will take a closer look at the various ways in which writing can be conceptualized – as a linguistic, cognitive, social, and cultural phenomenon – so that, by defining the phenomenon we are interested in, we will have a strong foundation in determining how to test it.

CHAPTER TWO

The nature of writing ability

Introduction

In Chapter 1, the role of writing in second-language learning was explored. In this chapter, we turn to a consideration of the nature of writing ability. Defining the skill that we want to test is a critical starting point in designing a test, and, as we shall see, the definition of writing ability for a particular context will depend in large measure on the considerations discussed in Chapter 1: that is, the specific group of second-language writers and the type of writing that these writers are likely to engage in.

This chapter looks at the nature of writing ability from several perspectives: first, in comparison with the other so-called productive skill of speaking, next as a social and cultural phenomenon, then as a cognitive activity. Finally, the relationship between writing and second-language proficiency is discussed.

The relationship between writing and speaking

It is traditional in language teaching and testing to categorize instances of language use into four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, using channel (aural versus visual) and mode (productive versus receptive). The extent to which these different skills actually involve different cognitive mechanisms or are simply various socio-culturally mediated manifestations of a more general language ability

is a matter of some controversy. While a full treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of this volume, in coming up with a definition of writing that can be useful for assessment it may be worthwhile spending some time considering the relationship between writing and the two skills most closely related to it: speaking (the other productive skill) and reading (the other visual skill). The role of reading in writing is dealt with later on in this chapter; in this section, I will summarize how recent scholars have conceptualized writing and speaking relationships.

The relationship between writing and speaking is important for language testing, among other reasons, because of the question to what extent writing can be seen as a special case of L2 language use and to what extent writing represents a distinctly different ability from speaking, drawing on many of the same linguistic resources but also relying on distinctly different mental processes. A good deal of literature in both first- and second-language studies has addressed the differences between speaking and writing from a number of different perspectives. As Grabe and Kaplan (1996) point out, linguists and educational researchers have historically held contradictory positions about the relationship between writing and speaking: traditional linguistic inquiry has held that speech is primary and written language is merely a reflection of spoken language, while educational research has taken the stance that the written form of the language is more 'correct' and therefore should be more highly valued than oral language. However, in recent years a consensus has been emerging to reconcile these two positions: neither oral nor written language is inherently superior to the other, but oral and written texts do vary across a number of dimensions, including (but not limited to) textual features, sociocultural norms and patterns of use, and the cognitive processes involved in text production and comprehension.

A useful summary of some of the differences between speaking and writing can be found in Brown (1994). Brown provides the following list of the characteristics that ordinarily differentiate written language from spoken language:

- **Permanence:** oral language is transitory and must be processed in real time, while written language is permanent and can be read and reread as often as one likes;
- **Production time:** writers generally have more time to plan, review, and revise their words before they are finalized, while speakers

must plan, formulate, and deliver their utterances within a few moments if they are to maintain a conversation;

- **Distance** between the writer and the reader in both time and space, which eliminates much of the shared context that is present between speaker and listener in ordinary face-to-face contact and thus necessitates greater explicitness on the part of the writer;
- **Orthography**, which carries a limited amount of information compared to the richness of devices available to speakers to enhance a message (e.g. stress, intonation, pitch, volume, pausing, etc.);
- **Complexity**: written language tends to be characterized by longer clauses and more subordinators, while spoken language tends to have shorter clauses connected by coordinators, as well as more redundancy (e.g. repetition of nouns and verbs);
- **Formality**: because of the social and cultural uses to which writing is ordinarily put, writing tends to be more formal than speaking;
- **Vocabulary**: written texts tend to contain a wider variety of words, and more lower-frequency words, than oral texts.

While Brown's list is a valuable, if somewhat oversimplified, starting point for discussing speaking/writing differences, the fact that the differences between speaking and writing go far beyond these surface textual features is becoming widely recognized. In particular, speaking and writing are frequently used in different settings, for different reasons, and to meet different communicative goals. Furthermore, the cognitive processes involved in writing differ in important ways from those used in speaking. The remainder of this section deals briefly with these issues.

As Grabowski (1996) notes, very few of the surface differences between speaking and writing result from the inherent properties of speaking and writing under ordinary circumstances. In fact, only the first two items on Brown's list (permanence and production time) can be seen as fundamental in this sense: writing ordinarily leaves a physical trace, which can later be referred to either by the writer or by the reader, while speaking, unless it is recorded, does not, and the physical act of writing takes longer than the physical act of speaking. All other differences between spoken and written texts either arise from these two fundamental differences, or can be ascribed to the fact that writing and speaking are for the most part used in different contexts and for different purposes. Grabowski lists a number of con-

ditions under which writing tends to be chosen over speaking, noting that while the choice is frequently based on social or conventional norms, other factors such as the costs and benefits of one mode of communication vis-à-vis the other also play a role. For example, it may be less costly to send an e-mail message than to make a long-distance phone call; on the other hand, if the message is urgent the advantage of speed may be more important than a saving of money.

In an extensive review of the literature on speaking/writing connections, Sperling (1996) concludes that:

to talk of written and spoken language differences is to consider the range of communicative purposes to which either writing or speaking is put. In this sense, broader characteristics – such as what gets said and what remains implicit, what is foregrounded and what is backgrounded, and what is stated by whom and under what circumstances – implicate the norms and expectations of the range of contexts in which both writing and speaking are produced.
(Sperling, 1996: 56)

In other words, even though features such as vocabulary and formality do frequently differ across speaking and writing, it may ultimately be more important to consider the wider social and cultural context in which speaking and writing are used. One of the most important distinctions between writing and speaking in this regard is the fact that, as discussed in Chapter 1, writing is highly valued in educational settings, and the standardization of writing means that accuracy in writing is frequently more important than accuracy in speaking. The importance of correctness in writing as opposed to speaking is particularly relevant for writing in academic contexts, where writing is frequently seen as a key to entry into the 'academic discourse community' (Spack, 1988; Swales, 1990). This issue is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

In addition to the social and cultural influences on writing as opposed to speaking, it is important to consider cognitive differences. To what extent does writing differ from speaking in terms of its demands on cognitive resources? Of all the differences between speaking and writing that have been discussed, it is the fact that the addressee is not generally present during the writing process that seems to have the most important cognitive implications. On the one hand, unlike a speaker, a writer does not need to devote cognitive resources to strategies for maintaining the flow of conversation such as avoiding long pauses or filling pauses with turn-keeping signals

(Sacks *et al.*, 1974; Grabowski, 1996). In writing, then, more time and energy can be spent on cognitive activities such as planning and information retrieval, as there is less communicative pressure to continuously produce utterances (Grabowski, 1996). On the other hand, the absence of an addressee presents a challenge to writers that speakers do not face: while speakers receive immediate feedback from listeners on how well a message is being communicated, writers must somehow construct a coherent message that attempts to take into account the existing knowledge, interests, and goals of the addressee without such feedback. Thus, a writer must devote a considerable amount of cognitive energy simultaneously managing several different kinds of information: information about the writing topic, information about the audience, and information about acceptable forms of written texts. In fact, it is this ability to anticipate the audience and shape a message appropriately in the absence of a conversation partner that distinguishes expert from inexperienced writers. This point is brought up again later in this chapter.

It should be noted here that the discussion about speaking and writing has oversimplified somewhat the distinctions between these two modes of communication to emphasize the differences between the interactional nature of ordinary speech (i.e. conversation) and the solitary nature of ordinary writing (i.e. writing various kinds of texts consisting of at least several connected sentences). In the real world, of course, there are plenty of examples of speech that exhibit characteristics of written language (sermons and lectures, for example) and many examples of written language that resemble speech (for example, e-mail communication, informal notes, or screenplays). Furthermore, current instructional practices, at least in the US, emphasize collaborative writing, peer response, and other forms of interaction to mitigate many of the challenges of writing discussed above (Sperling, 1996). As Bachman and Palmer (1996) point out, what have traditionally been called separate skills (such as speaking and writing) are more properly seen as different 'combination[s] of language abilities and task characteristics' (p. 76); that is, it is the nature of the specific task that determines which areas of language ability are engaged. For the purposes of language testing, Bachman and Palmer's perspective helps clarify the distinction between speaking and writing because these are seen not as fundamentally different abilities *per se*, but as different types of language-use tasks. This is a useful distinction because we are frequently interested in people's ability to use

language both for real-time interaction and for creating coherent texts without the aid of a conversation partner.

In summary, speech and written discourse draw on many of the same linguistic resources and can be used in many cases to meet the same communicative goals. However, writing differs from speech in a number of important ways, both in terms of textual qualities and in terms of the factors that govern the uses of each modality. Written language is not merely spoken language put on paper; rather, it is a distinct mode of communication, involving among other things very different sociocultural norms and cognitive processes. The next sections of this chapter discuss these aspects of writing in more detail.

Writing as a social and cultural phenomenon

Social aspects of writing

The physical act of writing is sometimes thought of as mainly the result of cognitive effort on the part of an individual writer. Indeed, the traditional approach to writing assessment has been to focus primarily on the cognitive aspects of writing, and these aspects will be discussed in detail below. However, it is important to view writing not solely as the product of an individual, but as a social and cultural act. Writing is 'an act that takes place within a context, that accomplishes a particular purpose, and that is appropriately shaped for its intended audience' (Hamp-Lyons and Kroll, 1997: 8). In a similar vein, Sperling (1996: 55) notes that 'writing, like language in general, [is] a meaning-making activity that is socially and culturally shaped and individually and socially purposeful.' Expanding on the social nature of writing, Hayes (1996) states:

[Writing] is also social because it is a social artifact and is carried out in a social setting. What we write, how we write, and who we write to is shaped by social convention and by our history of social interaction . . . The genres in which we write were invented by other writers and the phrases we write often reflect phrases earlier writers have written.
(Hayes, 1996: 5)

Much of the current literature on academic writing in a second language (specifically in English) emphasizes the social aspects of writing, referring to the process of learning to write in academic contexts as one of 'initiating ESL students into the academic

discourse community' (Spack, 1988; see also Swales, 1990). From this perspective, learning to write involves much more than simply learning the grammar and vocabulary of the language, or even the rhetorical forms common to academic writing. Writing may involve, for each discipline, 'examining the kinds of issues a discipline considers important, why certain methods of inquiry and not others are sanctioned, how the conventions of a discipline shape text in that discipline, how individual writers represent themselves in a text, how texts are read and disseminated within the discipline, and how one text influences subsequent texts' (Spack, 1988: 38). There is some controversy over whether it is important, or even possible, for teachers of writing to be well versed in the discourse conventions of disciplines outside their own (Spack, 1988), and also to what extent there exists a single 'academic discourse' that is shared across the academy and can thus be taught to ESL students (see Johns, 1990; Raimes, 1991; and Grabe and Kaplan, 1996, for summaries of these issues). While these controversies will not be solved in a volume on writing assessment, they serve as an illustration of the kinds of social issues that are involved in second-language writing research. For the purposes of this book, it is important to be aware of these issues because the social context of writing influences, among other things, the choice of genre and task in writing assessment. These issues will be addressed again in Chapter 5.

Cultural aspects of writing

The cultural aspects of writing have also been the subject of some controversy. The notion of contrastive rhetoric was first introduced by Kaplan (1966), who analyzed a large number of ESL essays and pointed out distinctive differences in the written discourse of students from different cultures, which he symbolized in clear, simple diagrams. English writing was described as a straight line, while 'Oriental' discourse was symbolized by an inward-pointing spiral, for example. While Kaplan's original thesis has been subjected to a number of criticisms (see Brown, 1994, and Leki, 1992, for summaries of these criticisms), the idea of contrastive rhetoric has recently regained respectability, as it has become clear to researchers that many aspects of writing are influenced by culture. Leki (1992) and Grabe and Kaplan (1989, 1996) provide useful introductions to some of the

cultural influences on writing. They point out that variation in writing in different cultures does not reflect inherent differences in thought patterns but rather 'cultural preferences which make greater use of certain options among the linguistic possibilities' (Grabe and Kaplan 1996: 184). These variations are learned primarily through the educational system, either directly (as in English, where certain rhetorical patterns are explicitly taught) or indirectly through extensive exposure to culture-specific patterns of discourse. Thus, these variations can be seen to some extent as reflections of cultural values as promoted through education.

In recent years, a number of investigators have explored variations in writing patterns that can be at least partially attributed to cultural influences. For example, Arabic prose is frequently said to use more coordination and parallelism, unlike the subordination and hierarchical organization preferred by writers of English (Ostler, 1987; Yorkey, 1977; Kaplan, 1966; all cited in Leki, 1992). Spanish writers prefer lengthy introductions, and instead of focusing narrowly on the main ideas of an essay, as in English, Spanish writers make use of digressions and asides to show their breadth of knowledge on the topic (Collado, 1981; cited in Leki, 1992). In Chinese, writers tend to provide a series of examples without stating the main point of the example or tying them together through a generalization, in contrast to the English preference for transparent, explicit connections in prose (Matalene, 1985; cited in Leki, 1992).

Investigation into contrastive rhetoric has demonstrated that cultural expectations can have a consequence for the coherence of texts – that is, the organization of a text into a meaningful whole. Coherence, as Leki (1992) notes, is not an inherent quality of the text itself, but rather comes from the accuracy of the writer's assessment of what the reader will be able to infer from the text. Because readers of a text bring their own background knowledge and expectations to the reading (Carrel and Eisterhold, 1983), misreadings of the author's intended message are possible, if not likely, if the writer has not gauged the needs and expectations of the reader correctly. For example, native speakers of English expect writing to be hierarchically organized, with explicit connections between ideas and direct statements, and with original content (Leki, 1992). English has also been called a 'writer-responsible' language (Hinds, 1987), meaning that the writer makes explicit the connections between propositions and ideas in the text so that readers do not need to infer these connections on their own. In a