



Canadian Language
Benchmarks/
Essential Skills

Niveaux de compétence
linguistique canadiens/
Compétences essentielles

Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks

On the Job

The Essential Skill of Writing



Copyright © 2006 Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks

The copyright holder gives permission for users of the document to make copies of selected pages for educational purposes.

Reproduction, either mechanical or electronic for other purposes is prohibited except with written permission from:

Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks
200 Elgin Street, Suite 803
Ottawa, Ontario
Canada K2P 1L5
Tel: (613) 230-7729
Fax: (613) 230-9305
Email: info@language.ca
Web site: www.language.ca



Contents

Writing	1
The Write Skill for the Job	1
Sample Writing Tasks: Chemical Plant Machine Operators and By-Law Officers....	2
Teaching Idea #1 – Jigsaw Resume Writing	4
CLB 1- 4 Strategies	6
CLB 5 – 9 Strategies: Résumés and Cover Letters.....	7
Teaching Idea #2 – Writing Cover Letters	8
Teaching Idea #3 – The STAR Formula.....	12
Glossary of Terms	15
Index	17

Writing

The Write Skill for the Job

Writing, Reading Text and Document Use are Essential Skills that are intertwined and very hard to teach in isolation. Teach them all together. Learners will need to use them all together in the workplace.



Writing includes writing texts, writing in documents (completing forms) and non-paper-based writing (on a computer). Complexity levels for writing are based on the length and purpose; style and structure and content of the writing. In addition, there are five levels of complexity defined (see the Reader's Guide to Essential Skills for full detail) which include factors such as:

- **Level 1** – to organize, remind or inform. Usually these tasks are informal for the worker's own use or a small familiar audience. Writing is less than one paragraph in length and on concrete, day-to-day matters.
- **Level 2** – text that is a paragraph or longer, with a more formal style and larger audience. writing brief texts such as letters, memos, and e-mails for routine tasks.
- **Level 3** – writing intended to inform, explain, request express opinions or give directions; writing has an established format; content may be extensive
- **Level 4** – longer pieces of writing which present considerable information; may require modification of an existing format; consideration of the audience is important; abstract or technical content may demand specialized vocabulary..

- **Level 5** — are longer pieces of writing which present evaluation or critique; appropriate tone and mood is important; content must be created or synthesized.

Essential Skills complexity Level 1 is roughly equivalent to approximately Benchmarks 4 and 5. Level 1 writing tasks include:

- write reminder notes regarding supplies or work to be done
- fill out time sheets and mileage forms
- make entries in appointment calendars
- write list of tasks in sequence them
- write weekly reports detailing hours worked and type of work done
- make log entries to record name, address and destination of registered mail, priority post and express post

Does this mean a learner at CLB 3 is incapable of making entries into an appointment calendar or filling out a time sheet? No. It would just mean that a review of the format of the writing and the vocabulary is needed, as well as in-class practice and support. These tasks can be taken from Essential Skills Profiles, combined with CLB descriptors and make observable, assessable learning outcomes for classes.

Sample Writing Tasks: Chemical Plant Machine Operators and By-Law Officers

The following examples drawn from two occupations serve to illustrate the type and range of writing tasks that might be asked of your students in the workplace. The first example, Chemical Plant Machine Operator, is an occupation where Writing is not considered one of the most important skills for that occupation. The other example, By-Law Enforcement and other Regulatory Officers, is one that Writing is considered a most important skill.

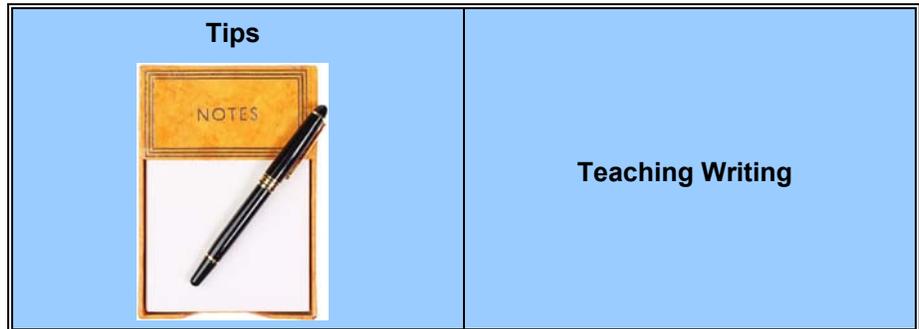
Chemical Plant Machine Operators (NOC # 9421)

- write reminder notes to themselves and co-workers (ES 1; CLB 4,5)
- record work completed on daily batch forms and add information to test forms (ES 1; CLB 4,5)
- write up modifications which have been made to improve a product (ES 2; CLB 6,7)
- write incident reports regarding failures of equipment or systems (ES 2; CLB 6,7)
- may write memos to supervisors requesting approval of an expenditure and justifying the expense (ES 2; CLB 6,7)
- may write minutes of team meetings (ES 2, CLB 6,7)
- may write revisions to sections of the company's standard operation procedures (ES 3; CLB 8)

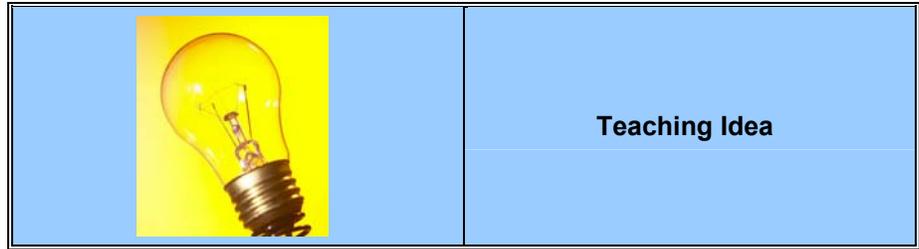
By-Law Enforcement and Other Regulatory Officers (NOC # 6463)

- write reminder notes to themselves concerning tasks to complete or instructions to provide to others (ES 1; CLB 4,5)

- write short reports to police departments about court appearances resulting from by-law infractions (ES 2; CLB 6,7)
- fill out a summons with a narrative of the charge and the names and addresses of individuals attending court (ES 3; CLB 8)
- prepare detailed analyses on by-law enforcement for council, making recommendations for revisions of bylaws and commenting on changes made to by-laws (ES 4; CLB 9)



- Because writing is a form of production, it adds a level of difficulty just in doing the task. For ESL learners, finding the right words, putting them into the correct order and spelling them correctly makes this task challenging. Not only are they struggling to make themselves clear but also to do that with fewer words at their disposal. When teaching writing in its many forms, it is also important to teach dictionary and thesaurus use in printed or online formats.
- Workers often have to write memos, make entries in log books, make lists and write informal and formal reports, more often than they will have to write paragraphs and essays. If employment is the main goal of the students in your class, then in-class practice of each of the styles and forms of writing should be in proportion to the probability that they will be used in the workplace.
- Workplace writing involves clarity and brevity. Practicing writing is very important with ESL learners. Use the following rule of thumb: Tell me what you are going to say, say it, and then tell me what you said.
- If a learner is just one benchmark level lower than what is assumed to be required to complete a particular task, such as filling out an accident report, will he be unable to do that task? Can learners perform at higher levels of CLB in some areas and not in others? Is it valuable to teach to the workplace and improve these skills for adult learners? The answer is yes! It is amazing what an adult learners can do if they feel it is relevant and important to their lives.



Teaching Idea #1 – Jigsaw Resume Writing

This example from the *Work Experience for Immigrants Program* at Bow Valley College in Calgary incorporates skills of reading text, oral communication, and time management, but it can be used with any selection of material:

1. Using the text, *Damn Good Resumes*¹, by Yana Parker, divide the class into five groups. The Reading section is divided into ten steps to a better resume. Assign two steps to each group. Each group's goal is to learn their two steps completely and become experts in these two steps. Set a time limit of ten minutes for each group to read, take notes, and learn the steps assigned to them. Take away the original materials.
2. Allow each group ten more minutes to confer with their expert groups and perfect their knowledge of the material. Practice teaching each other and correct mistakes. As they are practicing, the teacher can circulate from group to group and ensure that the most important parts are being addressed.
3. The next step is to learn and teach the information to each other. Announce that the next task needs to be completed in twenty minutes and each person will have to learn the rest of the ten steps from the other experts in the class. Inform them that at the end there will be a test to evaluate their comprehension. Do not assign rules or partners. Allow the learners to deal with the ambiguity of the activity.
4. Every five minutes announce how much time is left. Watch the dynamics of the groups and take notes on the language structures you hear being used and write them on the board. Any common grammar errors you hear during the conversations are good to note and review. Are they using socially appropriate questioning techniques? As the time allocated decreases, are people using more commands and fewer questions? Were any of the learners not participating? Did anyone employ a creative solution to learn the information they need?
5. At the end of the time, stop the activity and hand out the quiz. The use of a test is not typical of a workplace environment. It is used here only to inject an element of responsibility for one's own learning with consequences.

¹ Damn Good Resume Guide; A Crash Course in Resume Writing, Yana Parker, Ten Speed Press, 1996



6. After all learners have all had an opportunity to complete the test, inform them you will not be collecting them for marking, but rather they will be marking them themselves. Take up the test as a review. If time is not an issue, jigsaw the marking of the test as well. Have the expert groups mark their sections.
7. Debrief by reviewing all the notes on the board. Discuss how the ambiguous organization motivated them to create their own plan of attack. (Many different strategies often emerge. Sometimes they talk one-on-one, sometimes they gather into groups and have each expert teach the whole group, sometimes they get non-experts, who have already learned from an expert, to teach them.) The pros and cons of each of these plans can be reviewed.
8. Review the grammar structures. Ask why they felt they would make these errors. Often, the errors are using improper verbs tenses, pronouns (he instead of she), or incorrect parts of speech. Most learners know the grammar structures, but have not transferred that knowledge to the oral communication task.²

Note: A teachable moment at this point would be to reinforce the importance of moving towards accuracy in spoken communication. In addition to language, discuss behavior. What are the consequences in the workplace for passive behavior? For aggressive behavior? How does the aggressive behaviour compare to the assertive behaviour and which is acceptable in the workplace? Did everyone reach the goal of learning all ten steps? What impeded this process? What strategies helped this process?

9. Learners can then take this information learned about résumé writing and create or improve their own résumé. (See the section on Writing for more resume suggestions.)

Games such as just scanning for a particular word in a text, newspaper or journal can develop confidence. Scavenger hunts for information in a newspaper, text, journal or online resources emphasize this skill. Working in groups and describing how the information was found reinforces the strategies.

² A similar jigsaw activity can be found on pages 11 – 12 of the Reading section On the Job series.



CLB 1- 4 Strategies

CLB 1 - 4 Strategies	
<p>The global performance descriptors for CLB 1 to 4 include many tasks that can be taught to prepare learners for the workplace. For example, at CLB 2, learners are required to copy basic information from dictionaries and schedules. This is a Document Use and Writing task where the structure of the schedule or dictionary is reviewed and practiced in a variety of scenarios. At CLB 4 and 5, the use of the alphabetized list can then lead to the use of the Yellow Pages and finding company names in industries that are of interest to learners. The learners can then copy names of companies and contact information that could later be used in a job search.</p> <p>Another great example of a Document Use and Writing activity is the recording of personal information. In CLB 1, learners write basic personal identification information. In CLB 3, they fill out simple application and bank slips, and in CLB 4 they fill out slightly more complex applications. If job applications are used this is a good pre-step to writing résumés.</p>	

Great Resource

This series is available through the Bow Valley College Bookstore, 332 – 6th Ave. SE, Calgary, Alberta T2G 4S6, phone: (403) 410-1740, fax (403)297-6285.. The college website is www.bowvalleycollege.ca



One source for documents that has already been Benchmarked is *On Target*, and *On Target 2* published by Bow Valley College. In these volumes, there are number writing tasks that practice copying information, filling out forms, writing letters etc. These resources give you a starting point upon which to practice writing starting with a form that requires learners to enter name, address and phone number and gradually introducing forms that require learners to enter more information works to develop confidence and comfort. If you then compare 10 application forms the similarities are emphasized. (You could use a table to record these similarities and by doing so practice Document Use as well.³)

CLB 5 – 9 Strategies



CLB 5 – 9 Strategies: Résumés and Cover Letters

To get a job, it is expected that an application for a job often consists of a cover letter and a résumé. Entry into the world of work often hinges on the capacity to create these two documents. Letter writing is a skill that is practiced right from CLB 2 through to CLB 9, and the importance of doing this well can affect someone's ability to compete for the job initially.

Note: It is also true that after getting the job, letter writing might not be a job requirement, as less than 50% of workers write letters on company stationery. So that teaching should include this format as part of a writing curriculum that includes logs, memos, e-mail, and even post-it-notes.

On the www.itsessential.ca web site, you will find two CLB/Essential Skills lesson plans specifically for writing résumés.

Whatever format is being used to convey written information, the communication needs to be accurate, clear, brief and appropriate for the situation. Unclear written communication might put workers at risk in terms of safety regulations or even litigation.

Workplace Anecdote

One employer from a major Engineering Consulting firm stated that it was imperative that the engineers who work for him have high levels of language because part of the job description was to negotiate contracts and fulfill contractual agreements. Misunderstandings and incorrect word usage could cost the firm a lot of money. Apparently the risk associated with making a mistake gets higher as levels of responsibility increase.

³ See the section on Document Use for more ideas about using lists with ESL learners.



Teaching Idea



Teaching Idea #2 – Writing Cover Letters

Writing a cover letter to apply for a job has become a much more complex activity in the last decade. A person can no longer write just, “I found your ad in the newspaper and I would like that job”. Nowadays, cover letters are usually expected to include reasons why you want to work for that company and why the company would want you to work for them. This selling of oneself, the understanding of the marketplace and the critical thinking required to bring these elements together in a cover letter is highly complex and is an expectation embedded in our business culture. Writing simpler letters to ask for information, to express interest in a company before an ad has been placed and thanking an interviewer for the opportunity to meet with them are all variations of this letter format.

Getting a job is a competition and to bring this home to a class a *pyramid activity* works well. Like the name implies it is an activity that goes from a wide base to a pinnacle point. The general idea is that each member of the class will individually have the opportunity to review a selection of things and make five selections (or whatever number you like) as examples they like the best. Individuals take their selections to a smaller group and through discussion, review and compromise the group chooses one example as the one best choice. Then the smaller group will be joined by another smaller group and go through the same negotiation process to select their combined best choice. Groups are combined at each step of the process until only one group remains (i.e., the whole class). From this larger group a final selection is made. So, the process is to go from a wide base or number of decisions to one decision reached by the entire group. This approach ensures a lot of communication and group dynamics.



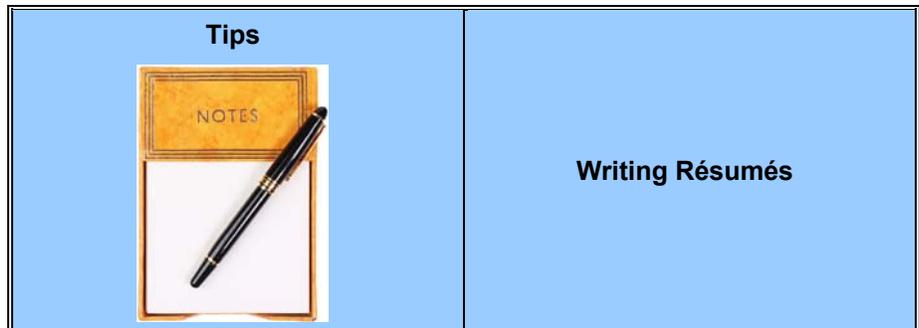
1. The activity in this section would best follow a lesson on discussion skills and negotiation, as well as a unit on writing an effective cover letter and resume (See Résumés and Cover Letters on page 7). Have learners submit a cover letter, with an appropriate job ad they have found online or in the newspaper. Tell them in advance that these will be used in class. Photocopy four class sets. Form the class into four workgroups and distribute one set to each group. Outline the outcomes for the activity:
 - to edit and give peer feedback on cover letters,
 - to decide what makes a good cover letter and choose five letters that demonstrate these factors
 - to discuss choices with group members and make group choices
 - to recognize that writing a strong cover letter increases your chances of getting an interview
 - to practice discussion and negotiation skills
2. Set the scene: students are to select five letters they like best from the stack. Brainstorm criteria that they may want to use in making their choices, such as:
 - Content and language elements, which might include;
 - a strong link between the job ad and the letter,
 - not starting with “I found your ad in the local paper”,
 - not starting every sentence with I,
 - Format and structural elements, which might include;
 - neat and tidy appearance,
 - readable font in a size range from 10-12,
 - not too much text on the page and not too much white space
 - date, greeting, signature, mailing address and return address in an appropriate location
 - spaces between paragraphs and proper margins
3. First, allow individuals to scan the stack on their own and make their selections. Then start the pyramid activity. It will go from individual choice to group choice to class choice, forming the peak of the

pyramid. Ultimately the class will select five letters everyone likes the best. This will be done through discussion and negotiation. At each level, choices have to be explained and justified. Once the best letters of the class have been determined, have the groups make a list of things they liked about these cover letters. As a follow-up activity, ask students to take this evaluative information home, select a new job ad, write a new cover letter and resubmit it for the following week.

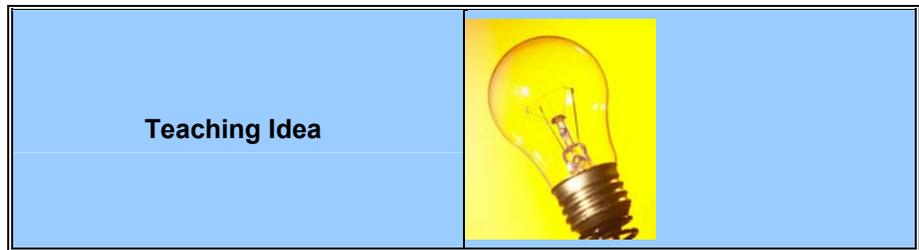
4. Methods of decision-making are interesting topics for the debriefing session. Did they use democracy, dictatorship or consensus? What are the pros and cons of each? The issue of plagiarism can also be discussed at this point. Many cultures have different values around original work and the concept of plagiarism. Learners appreciate the discussion around this issue. When a letter or resume has been copied from an online source or from a book this poses several problems:
 - The text is lacking in personal detail therefore is not effectively selling the skills of the author.
 - The wording and format has often been overused and therefore easily identifiable as copied.
 - A person submitting a resume or cover letter that is obviously not in their own voice might cause an interviewer to question the honesty of the applicant. If they did not write it, then who did? Can they really do what they say they can do?

This kind of assessment practices the Essential Skill of Critical Thinking.





- Résumés are commonly required to get a job. A resume is effectively a series of bulleted lists describing what a worker has done in the past. One great hint to help learners write more effective résumés is to use the Essential Skill Profile for the occupation they are targeting, or for a closely related occupation. Review the most important skills for that occupation. Have students select the skills they have already developed and write an example of a time they used that skill. For example, for a Chemical Plant Machine Operator position they might take the task “Write incident reports regarding failures of equipment or systems” and change it to describe their actual experience by saying, “wrote an incident report documenting the failure of the centrifugal pump used in XYZ chemical process that was later used to re-evaluate the safety procedures.”
- Avoid clichéd responses such as “fast learner” or “team player”, as they have been overused and just signal that the resume writer has copied. Tell the reader what you have done that demonstrates these skills. For example, “I learned four accounting software packages in three weeks and developed and delivered training programs to fellow employees on the application and use of these packages.” The resume reader will say, “Wow...they learn fast and they are team players as well!” You don’t have to tell them. This is the fine line between bragging and stating fact. Lean towards stating fact and use the STAR formula to help. (See more on STAR method below).
- Use verbs that are active and descriptive. Avoid words like “responsible for”, or “participated in”, “successful”, “excellent” or “good” as they are subjective. Instead, use quantitative descriptions that give results. This is where the Essential Skills of numeracy and writing blend together.
- Change the tense in job tasks from simple present to past, if you are no longer working at that job. If you are, present continuous works. Be specific when discussing past accomplishments or tasks. Generalities are not as effective.



Teaching Idea #3 – The STAR Formula

The STAR formula⁴ is a wonderful formula to use when writing résumés, going for interviews or even writing cover letters. What is a STAR? STAR stands for:

- **S** — Situation or
- **T** — Task
- **A** — Action, and
- **R** — Result

In a resume, if the situation or task and the action taken is described and then followed with the result, it has impact. Did you save the company time, money or increase safety standards or improve customer relations? Not only does this formula force the resume writer to speak using specific examples but also makes it clear to the resume reader that this person can do what they say they can do. This resume item was not cut and pasted from some online example. For example; if a teacher was to list on their resume they taught lessons, marked papers, submitted grades, the potential employer might think “So what?” These are standard teaching tasks. However, if a teacher writes on their resume: “...integrated Workplace Essential Skills into ESL curriculum resulting in better student performance (eight out of ten participants reporting evidence of improved performance in their part-time jobs)”, an employer will certainly take notice.



⁴ The STAR formula (also known as the SAR or PAR interview method) is widely used in career counselling.

Instructional Design Ideas



- Establish a regular schedule of assignments that are due. For example, have learners record hours worked on homework assignments in a log book and have assignments due every Monday. This log book could be submitted by e-mail. The instructor could initiate the e-mail with a note such as “Please report on your progress on the assignments so far”.
- Have learners record minutes to meetings and post them in the classroom.
- Have assignments and communications done on e-mail if possible and practice proper e-mail etiquette.
- Wherever possible, have learners develop and send their letters or résumés to the companies they are interested in. This makes the activity practical and moves it outside the classroom walls.
- Encourage learners to e-mail or use an online chat⁵ to communicate with each other (in English of course). Through an online user group, an instructor could pose questions to learners and encourage everyone to respond. This could include questions about assignments, research or even opinions on issues discussed in class.

Notes:

⁵ Yahoo, Microsoft and other web resource providers offer free webmail tools that allow you to connect to others by chat, by microphone and with web cameras (webcams).

Glossary of Terms

Critical Thinking

Critical Thinking refers to the process of making judgements. For the purpose of profiling the skill of Critical Thinking, it is defined as follows:

Critical thinking is the process of evaluating ideas or information, using a rational, logical thought process, and referring to objective criteria, to reach a rational judgment about value, or to identify strength and weakness.

Essential Skills Profiles

Essential Skills profiles describe how each of the nine Essential Skills are used by workers in a particular occupation. Over the past several years, the Government of Canada has conducted research examining the skills people use at work. From this research and through interviews with workers, managers, practitioners and leading researchers, close to 200 Essential Skills profiles have been developed for various occupations of the National Occupational Classification. To date, profiles have been completed for all occupations requiring a high school education or less. Research is ongoing to complete occupations requiring university, college or apprenticeship training.

Reader's Guide to Essential Skills

One of the main resources for Essential Skills practitioners. This document explains how complexity levels are assigned, how skills are defined, and gives examples of usage.

webcams

Webcams (Web cameras) are small video cameras that connect to your computer and allow you to broadcast and film footage. They can be used with webmail chat services.

Document Use

The federal government defines Document Use as, "... tasks that involve a variety of information displays in which words, numbers, icons and other visual characteristics (eg., line, colour, shape) are given meaning by their spatial arrangement. For example, graphs, lists, tables, blueprints, schematics, drawings, signs and labels are documents used in the world of work. If a document includes a paragraph of text such as on a label or a completed form, it is also included in A. Reading Text. Documents requiring the entry of words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs are also included in C. Writing."

Index

C

Complexity 1, 2
Complexity Level 15
Cover Letter 7, 8, 11

E

Essential Skill Profiles 15

I

Ideas 6, 7

J

Jigsaw 4, 8

L

Lists 6, 8

R

Reader's Guide to Essential Skills 1
Resource 4, 7
Résumés 4, 7, 8, 11

S

STAR 11
Strategies 4, 6, 7, 8, 11

T

Thinking 11
Tips 4, 7, 8, 11

W

Workplace anecdote 4, 8, 11