

THE WRITING ACADEMY®, LLC

THE WRITING MATRIX

A Professional Learning Handout for Teachers



Find each student's cognitive address — then teach the next move.

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1 Welcome & How to Use This Handout

Welcome to your professional development session on The Writing Matrix. This handout is designed to be a practical tool for your classroom, not just a collection of notes. It is built to help you see more clearly what students understand, where their thinking stops, and what small instructional move can help them advance.

This document is interactive. Throughout the session, you will find prompts to help you connect these concepts to your actual students. The goal of this training is not to add more paperwork to your desk, but to lighten the work of interpretation. By using the matrix, you can move away from vague labels and toward precise, actionable instruction.

TRY IT

Find a piece of student work on your desk or think of a recent assessment. Keep it in mind as you move through the sections.

REFLECT

How often do you find yourself looking at a student's score and wondering, "What do I teach them next?"

2 Why a Score Is Not Enough

A single score or a list of missed items is often incomplete. A score can tell us that a student had difficulty, but it cannot tell us if the struggle came from recalling facts, selecting evidence, explaining an inference, or organizing a response. When we rely solely on a percentage, we overlook the specific cognitive roadblocks preventing student growth.

Two students can earn a 60 percent on the same assessment but require completely different lessons. One might need help with evidence, while the other needs help with reasoning. One might be struggling with the complexity of the text, while the other is struggling with the complexity of the prompt. A single score can hide these distinct patterns, leading teachers to teach "the middle" when students actually need targeted intervention at specific cognitive points.

RESPOND

Think of a recent student response. What score did it earn, and what did the score fail to tell you?

REFLECT

If you have a student who consistently scores a 70%, but they always miss the "why" questions, what is the actual problem you are seeing?

TRY IT

Look at a recent class average. If the class scored a 75%, can you identify if the struggle was in the "what" (content/TAUGHT) or the "how" (reasoning/THINK)?

3 The Writing Matrix at a Glance

The Writing Matrix uses two coordinates to find a student's "Cognitive Address." By combining a Dimension with a Level, you identify exactly where a student is in their thinking process. This "address" is a temporary description of demonstrated thinking; it is not a permanent label for the child.

The power of the matrix lies in its ability to provide a specific location for a student's current ability. Instead of saying a student is "low," you can say they are at an "Emergent level in the THINK dimension." This shift in language changes the teacher's role from a judge of ability to a navigator of progress.

Coordinate	Type	Description
Dimension	The "What"	The kind of comprehension or writing work being asked.
Level	The "How Well"	How fully, precisely, and independently the student demonstrates it.
Address	The "Where"	The combination of Dimension and Level.

TRY IT

Using the two coordinates above, try to describe a student's current ability. (Example: The student is at an Emergent level in the THINK dimension).

REFLECT

How does describing a student's "address" rather than their "ability" change how you feel about their potential for growth?

4 The Five Thinking Levels

The levels progress in a specific developmental order. As students move through these levels, they move from recognizing and beginning toward explaining, owning, evaluating, transferring, and creating. These levels are represented by a fixed color order that helps you visualize the cognitive climb.

It is vital to remember that a student can move through these levels in one dimension while remaining at a lower level in another. For example, a student might be Independent in TAUGHT (recalling facts) but only Emergent in THINK (making inferences). We must respect the profile of the student rather than averaging their scores into a single, inaccurate number.

Level	Color	Cognitive focus
Foundational		Recognize, locate, or notice
Emergent		Begin, identify, or partly connect
Visible		Show and explain
Independent		Initiate, select, and carry out
Reflective		Evaluate, synthesize, transfer, and create

REFLECT

Which level do most of your students currently inhabit when working on complex writing tasks?

TRY IT

Pick a student who is a "strong writer" but struggles with analysis. Which level are they likely hitting in the THINK dimension?

5 The Four Dimensions

The dimensions identify the specific cognitive work being performed. These can be applied to both reading questions and writing prompts. Understanding the dimension is the first step in finding the student's Cognitive Address.

When you analyze a task, you must determine which of these four areas the task is primarily targeting. A prompt might touch on several, but the "primary dimension" is the one that determines the student's success or failure in meeting the task's core demand.

Dimension	What it means	The question it answers
TAUGHT	Use What Has Been Learned	Does the student apply the relevant content, genre knowledge, or a taught HABIT?
TAP	Select and Use Evidence	Is the evidence present, relevant, precise, and sufficient?
THINK	Develop Meaning and Reasoning	Does the student move beyond summary into reasoning or interpretation?
TOGGLE	Explain Relationships	Are relationships explained and used to organize the response?

TRY IT

Take a prompt you used recently. Which of these four dimensions was the primary focus?

RESPOND

If a student can identify a character's emotion (Foundational) but cannot explain *why* they feel that way, which dimension are they struggling to move up in?

The dimension is the "What"—the specific type of cognitive work being asked.

6 Find the Cognitive Address (the process)

To find a Cognitive Address, you must first analyze the task. You cannot accurately place a student if the demand of the task is unclear. Once the task is defined, study the response. You are looking for the highest level that appears consistently, not just the hardest item they got right.

A common mistake is to look at a student's errors in spelling or punctuation and assume they are "low level." You must separate the thinking from the mechanics. A response can contain strong, high-level reasoning even if the student's conventions are still developing. We are looking for the "demonstrated thinking."

Scenario: A student is asked to explain a character's motivation (THINK). The student writes: "He is sad because his dog died." The student uses a period correctly and has clear handwriting. While the reasoning is simple, they have successfully identified a cause and effect. They are demonstrating a specific level of THINK.

RESPOND

When looking at a student's work, do you tend to focus on their errors (conventions) or their ideas (cognition) first?

TRY IT

Look at a student response that is technically perfect but only repeats what was in the text. What is their Cognitive Address?

The address belongs to the demonstrated thinking, not to the child.

7 Use Answer Choices to Guide Instruction

In multiple-choice assessments, "wrong" answers are not all equally wrong. Each distractor is written around a believable misconception or an incomplete reasoning path. When a student repeatedly selects a specific distractor, it is a clue.

For example, if a student consistently picks an answer that is a literal repetition of a sentence in the text, they are likely stuck at a Foundational or Emergent level in the THINK dimension. They are choosing "what is there" rather than "what it means." This pattern of evidence across several items supports a much more accurate placement than a single missed question.

Distractor Type	What it reveals
Literal/Repetitive	Student is stuck in the Foundational/Emergent levels.
Partial Reasoning	Student has started the process but hasn't completed the connection.
Misidentified Relationship	Student is struggling with the TOGGLE dimension.

TRY IT

If a student consistently picks answers that simply repeat words from the text (literal) instead of making an inference, what is their likely Cognitive Address?

RESPOND

How can you use a "wrong" answer to plan a ten-minute mini-lesson for the whole class?

One answer is a clue; a pattern of evidence supports placement.

8 Read a Response Through Three Lenses

When analyzing writing, you must separate the different demands being made of the student. Using three separate lenses produces a more accurate next lesson. If you try to fix everything at once, you will overwhelm the student and blur your own instructional focus.

If a student is brilliant at reasoning (Cognition) but cannot organize their thoughts (Composition), a lesson on "how to think deeper" will not help them. They need a lesson on "how to structure an argument." By separating these, you can provide the exact support needed for their specific roadblock.

Lens	Focus
Cognition	The thinking: Does the student answer the prompt and use reasoning?
Composition	The build: Is the structure, organization, and development clear?
Conventions	The mechanics: Are the grammar, spelling, and punctuation correct?

REFLECT

Can a student be "Independent" in cognition but "Foundational" in conventions? How would you teach that student?

TRY IT

Look at a student's essay. Identify one strength in Cognition and one area for growth in Composition.

9 Teach One Level to the Right (the next move)

Do not ask a student to move across the entire matrix in one lesson. The goal is to teach the "Next Address"—the smallest observable level of thinking that comes next. This is a small, manageable move designed to build confidence and mastery.

This is not about "more work"; it is about "different work." You model the difference between where they are and where the next level lives. You might show a "Visible" response (using a graphic organizer) and then show an "Independent" response (using their own internal structure). You guide practice, and then you remove the support.

Scenario: A student is currently at the "Visible" level in the TAP dimension, meaning they can select evidence if you give them a sentence frame. The "Next Address" is "Independent." Your instructional move is to provide a task where they must select and integrate that evidence without the frame.

TRY IT

If a student is at the "Visible" level (explaining with a graphic organizer), what is the "Next Address" for a student aiming for "Independent" (initiating the process themselves)?

REFLECT

How much time do you currently spend trying to teach "everything" instead of just the "next move"?

Teach one level to the right and check the move with a fresh task.

10 Group by What Students Need Next

Grouping should be a temporary instructional decision. Students should not be grouped by a permanent label like "low readers." Instead, group them because they all need to work on the same specific move.

A group might need to move from "identifying a relationship" (Emergent TOGGLE) to "analyzing a relationship" (Visible TOGGLE). Once the students have mastered that specific move, the group dissolves. This prevents the "tracking" effect where students feel stuck in a permanent ability tier.

REFLECT

How would your planning change if your groups were based on "the next move" rather than "current ability"?

TRY IT

Look at your roster. Can you find three students who all struggle specifically with "connecting evidence to reasoning"? That is your next group.

Grouping is a temporary instructional decision.

11 The Five-Step Teacher Routine

To make this practical for Monday morning, follow this routine. This is the core engine of The Writing Matrix. It allows you to take the evidence you already have and turn it into a plan.

1. **Find the current Cognitive Address:** Identify the dimension and level the student consistently demonstrates.
2. **Name the Next Address:** Choose the smallest observable level of thinking that comes next.
3. **Decide what the student needs to pack up:** Name the knowledge, strategy, or behavior needed for the move.
4. **Teach the move:** Model the difference and guide practice.
5. **Check for growth:** Use a fresh task to see if the move holds.

Scenario: You notice students are stating facts but not explaining them.

1. **Current Address:** Emergent THINK.
2. **Next Address:** Visible THINK.
3. **Pack Up:** A sentence starter that says, "This shows that..."
4. **Teach the Move:** Model how to use that starter to connect a quote to an idea.
5. **Check for Growth:** Give a new quote and see if they use the connection independently.

TRY IT

Using the student work from the beginning of this session, attempt to complete all five steps of the routine.

REFLECT

Which of these five steps do you find the most challenging to implement in a busy classroom?

12 Put It All Together (a worked example)

To truly master the matrix, we must see it in action. Let's look at a complete diagnostic and instructional cycle.

The Task: A prompt asking students to explain why a character's decision was significant.

The Student Work: The student correctly identifies the character's decision and provides one quote from the text, but they do not explain how the quote proves the significance. They stop after stating the evidence.

The Analysis:

- **Dimension:** THINK (Reasoning/Significance).
- **Current Address:** Emergent (They have begun to connect, but it is incomplete).
- **Next Address:** Visible (Showing and explaining the connection).
- **Pack Up:** Using a sentence frame to connect evidence to reasoning.
- **The Move:** A lesson comparing a response that just "states" to a response that "explains."

REFLECT

How does this specific diagnosis change your lesson plan compared to just saying "the student needs help with reasoning"?

TRY IT

Create a "Pack Up" list for a student who is at the Foundational level in the TAUGHT dimension.

The matrix makes the diagnosis precise.

13 My Next Move (closing commitment)

As you leave today, remember that you do not have to change everything you teach. You only need to change how you look at the work students are already doing. Start small. Use one task, one dimension, and one group. When the process helps you make a clearer decision, add another piece.

The Writing Matrix is meant to lighten your load by making your instruction more direct. When you know exactly where a student is, you no longer have to guess what to do next.

REFLECT

What is one small change you will make to your feedback or grouping based on today's session?

TRY IT

Write down your "Next Move" for a specific student or group you are teaching this week.

My Next Move:

Quick-Reference Card

Cognitive Address = Dimension (the kind of thinking) + Level (how fully it is shown).

The Four Dimensions

TAUGHT	Use what has been learned — content, genre knowledge, or a taught HABIT.
TAP	Select and use evidence — present, relevant, precise, sufficient.
THINK	Develop meaning and reasoning — beyond summary into interpretation.
TOGGLE	Explain relationships — used to organize the response.

The Five Thinking Levels

 Foundational	Recognize, locate, or notice
 Emergent	Begin, identify, or partly connect
 Visible	Show and explain
 Independent	Initiate, select, and carry out
 Reflective	Evaluate, synthesize, transfer, and create

The Five-Step Teacher Routine

1. Find the current cognitive address.
2. Name the next address (one level to the right).
3. Decide what the student needs to pack up.
4. Teach the move — model, then guide.
5. Check for growth with a fresh task.

+ Cognitive Address Planner

Use this planner to move from a score to a next move. Name where the student’s thinking is now, and the smallest move that comes next.

Student	Task / Dimension	Current Address (Level)	Next Address	The Move	Check

Grouping Planner for PLC

Group by the **next move**, not by a permanent label. For each group, name the prompt's **dimension**, the **thinking level (RPLD)** the students answered it at, and the **assessment level** that combines them (for example, TAP / Independent, coded B-3). A group forms because its students need the same move, and it dissolves once they have it.

Group 1

Prompt dimension: ☐ TAUGHT ☐ TAP ☐ THINK ☐ TOGGLE

Thinking level (RPLD): ☐ Foundational ☐ Emergent ☐ Visible ☐ Independent
☐ Reflective

Assessment level: _____ (e.g., TAP / Independent — B-3)

Students in this group

Next move / mini-lesson

Group 2

Prompt dimension: ☐ TAUGHT ☐ TAP ☐ THINK ☐ TOGGLE

Thinking level (RPLD): ☐ Foundational ☐ Emergent ☐ Visible ☐ Independent
☐ Reflective

Assessment level: _____ (e.g., TAP / Independent — B-3)

Students in this group

Next move / mini-lesson

Teacher Practice: Find the Cognitive Address

Passage: The Empty Garden Bed

When Mrs. Carter's class returned from spring break, they noticed that one of the school garden beds was almost empty. Several small plants had dried out because no one had watered them during the unusually warm week. At first, the students were disappointed and wanted to pull everything out and start over. Then Ella noticed that three tomato plants still had green leaves near the bottom. She suggested that the class water them, remove the damaged leaves, and give the plants a few days before deciding what to do. The students followed her plan. By the end of the next week, two of the plants had begun growing new leaves. Mrs. Carter told the class that the garden had taught them something that could not be learned from a worksheet: sometimes it is worth giving something another chance before deciding that it cannot recover.

THINK Prompt — Explain Why

Explain why Mrs. Carter says the students learned something from the garden that could not be learned from a worksheet. Use evidence from the passage to support your response.

This is a THINK prompt because the student must move beyond what happened and explain *why* the experience mattered.

Three Student Responses

Read only the first sentence each student wrote. Do not assume that a longer answer would represent stronger thinking.

Lane — “Mrs. Carter says the garden taught the students something a worksheet could not because they experienced how patience can reveal possibilities that are easy to miss when we judge something too quickly.”

Jake — “Mrs. Carter says the students learned something because the tomato plants started growing new leaves after the students took care of them.”

Luke — “Mrs. Carter says the students learned something from the garden because seeing the damaged plants recover helped them understand why giving something another chance can sometimes be worthwhile.”

Teacher Challenge

For each student, determine:

- What level of THINK cognition is visible in this one sentence?
- Where does the student's thinking stop?
- What can the student already do?
- What is the next Cognitive Address?
- What should the teacher teach to move the student one level to the right?

Teacher Answer Key

Jake **Emergent** Developing · Square

What the sentence reveals: Jake gives a relevant reason and refers to what happened, but his thinking remains close to the events of the passage. He has not fully explained the larger meaning of the experience.

Next move: Move toward Visible by teaching him to explain what the evidence helped the students understand.

Luke **Independent** Independent · Upright Triangle

What the sentence reveals: Luke independently connects the event to the lesson and clearly explains why the experience mattered.

Next move: Move toward Reflective by asking him to evaluate, extend, or transfer the lesson beyond this situation.

Lane **Reflective** Highly Independent · Diamond

What the sentence reveals: Lane moves beyond the immediate event and expresses a broader principle about patience, judgment, and unseen possibilities.

Next move: Extend Reflective thinking through nuance, limits, alternative interpretations, or transfer to another situation.

What the Teacher Might Say Next

To Jake: “You told me what happened. Now explain what the students understood because that happened.”

To Luke: “You explained the lesson clearly. Where else could this same idea apply, and are there situations where giving something another chance might not be the best decision?”

To Lane: “You extended the lesson beyond the garden. Now consider whether waiting and giving something another chance is always wise. What evidence would help someone decide?”

Key to Keep

The number of words does not determine the level of thinking. A single sentence can reveal literal or developing thinking, independent reasoning, or sophisticated reflective thinking.

The teacher’s job is not to count how much the student wrote. The teacher’s job is to determine: **Where did the thinking stop, and what is the smallest move that will take it one level farther?**