Linguaskill Writing
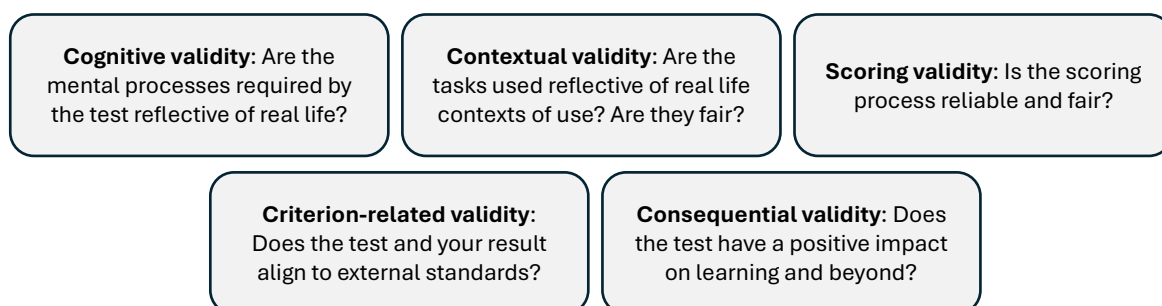
CAMBRIDGE
English

Writing

In order to provide evidence of how well Linguaskill measures what it is intended to measure, Cambridge aim to show how the test tasks relate to language activities in the real world in terms of how well they replicate those language behaviours in the target use domain (a mix of contextual and cognitive validity[1]) and how well the tasks relate to concepts of language proficiency as illustrated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (criterion-related validity).

The theoretical framework that guides the test evaluation process for Linguaskill is Weir's (2005) socio-cognitive framework for language test validation. The framework is described as socio-cognitive in that "the abilities to be tested are demonstrated by the mental processing of the learner (the cognitive dimension); equally, the use of language in performing tasks is viewed as a *social* rather than a purely linguistic phenomenon" (Taylor, 2011, p.25). Below is an illustration of how the framework focuses on specific aspects of test validity.

Cognitive validity: Are the mental processes required by the test reflective of real life?

Contextual validity: Are the tasks used reflective of real life contexts of use? Are they fair?

Scoring validity: Is the scoring process reliable and fair?

Criterion-related validity: Does the test and your result align to external standards?

Consequential validity: Does the test have a positive impact on learning and beyond?

These kinds of questions are considered extensively in the design, development and use of Linguaskill Writing. The Writing component has two versions which candidates can opt to take: an essay focused on general/academic English use or a report more reflective of professional/work contexts. In terms of cognition, both tasks are informed by established models of cognition in the production of writing (Kellogg, 1996) to reflect the cognitive demands of writing in academic and professional contexts.

Table 1

Aspects of writing	Narrative writing	Expository writing
Genre description	Agent-oriented, people-oriented, chronological	Topic-oriented, ideas, claims, and arguments Persuasive, compare and contrast, argumentative, procedural texts
Lexical features	Personal pronouns, sensory images	Advanced vocabulary, less frequent vocabulary, abstract, complex, multi-syllabic words
Syntactic features	Shorter clauses, less complex phrases, more active voice	Longer clauses, more complex noun phrases, more relative and adverbial clauses, more passive voice
Cognitive load	Less cognitive effort	More cognitive effort, more planning time, more sophisticated knowledge-transforming strategy

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[1] See *Linguaskill Overview* document for more information on these terms and Weir's (2005) socio-cognitive framework which is used to guide the development of a validation argument for Linguaskill.

Table 1 (adapted from Jeong, 2017) provides a useful contrast between narrative and expository writing research insights. As both tasks elicit expository texts, they focus on "more formal types of transactional and evaluative writing" described in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020, p.68) and which are also highly valued in professional and academic settings (Crowhurst, 1990). In adopting these expository genre tasks the writing component tries to reflect real-world writing (contextual validity) while also giving candidates in the B1-C2 levels appropriate opportunities to show their language abilities[2].

This, in turn, helps ensure that the test is aligned with external standards like the CEFR in that it reflects the shift from a learner being able to produce "straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects" to being able to produce "well-structured texts of complex subjects" (Council of Europe, 2020, p.66). The table below provides an overview of functional foci and where the CEFR is an important reference point for what the test elicits.

Table 2

Writing version	Genre	Functional foci	CEFR descriptors of relevance
General	Essay	▪ Weighing up for & against / justify own view ▪ Discussing and evaluating arguments for and against the proposition ▪ Stating and justifying own view: indicating extent of agreement with proposition statement	▪ Overall written production (B1-C2) ▪ Reports and essays (B1-C2) ▪ General linguistic range (B1-C2) ▪ Vocabulary control (B1-C2) ▪ Grammatical accuracy (B1-C2) ▪ Thematic development (B1-C2) ▪ Coherence and cohesion (B1-C2) ▪ Propositional precision (B1-C2)
Business	Report	▪ Weighing up for & against / justify own view ▪ Discussing and evaluating benefits and issues of a policy/situation ▪ Stating and justifying own view: providing recommendations	

In terms of scores, Cambridge trains, certificates and monitors Linguaskill examiners to ensure the scores they provide are accurate and fair. Examiner performance is carefully monitored to prevent inconsistencies in examining. Candidates are awarded a single mark but this is derived from the examiner considering specific criteria (Table 3).

Table 3

Criteria	Description
Communicative Achievement	How well does the writing use genre and sociolinguistic conventions to communicate straightforward and complex ideas in ways that are appropriate to the intended audience? For example, a higher-proficiency writer will show greater control, flexibility and sophistication in how they convey ideas in genre-appropriate ways.
Organisation	How well does the writer use organisational devices to create cohesive and coherent texts? For example, a lower-proficiency writer may rely on a more limited repertoire of linking words (e.g., but) whereas at higher levels the writer will use more subtle means to bring themes and points into contrast.
Language	How well does the writer to use their knowledge of lexis and grammar to successfully convey meaning? For example, as a writer develops they are more able to use complex lexico-grammatical structures (e.g. the use of more complex noun phrases or more specialised lexis).

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[2] As Jeong (2017) suggests, while expository texts are challenging for lower-level learners – they can provide a fairer and more stable basis for assessments in multi-level testing situations.

These criteria are considered individually and then combined. It is via this process that Linguaskill Writing aims to provide scores which are a fair reflection of both linguistic and broader communicative skills.

In addition to CEFR alignment being built into task development (e.g., via standardised item production procedures, pretesting etc.), Cambridge routinely conducts standard setting activities to ensure that exams are monitored for CEFR alignment (e.g., Lopes & Cheung, 2020).

While it is impossible to measure the impact of Linguaskill prior to it going live, studies of the original Linguaskill exam point to positive consequences in terms of achievement of career goals and increased employability (Khalifa et al., 2014) also ease-of-use and accuracy of reporting (Ismail et al., 2020). Research into the impact of the test will be routinely conducted as it grows in use to ensure it is having a positive influence on stakeholders.

Sample tests

Linguaskill Writing sample test 1
Linguaskill Writing sample test 2
Linguaskill Business Writing sample test 1
Linguaskill Business Writing sample test 2

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