

# Why Is Another Book on Report Writing Needed?

Jeanne Anne's husband is a teacher. Early in their relationship, as she was spending her Saturday afternoon writing psychoeducational reports, he flippantly asked, "Why are you spending so much time on those? Nobody reads them anyway." At the time, her frustration hindered her ability to engage in a meaningful conversation about his opinion, probably because at some level she knew he was correct. She truly had become a gatekeeper on the way to Special Education services and her report was simply a step to be completed. It had no purpose other than to sit in a file. A seed was planted, and what would become a professional journey to improve the usefulness of her reports began. Along the way she met Michael, whose journey probably began on a much less dramatic note. He was spending a lot of time and effort on his assessments, had important things to say, and wanted people to read his reports and consider his recommendations.

This book is the result of our efforts both as practitioners to write better reports and as educators to teach others to do so as well. Our goal for our students and ourselves is to write reports that represent children and their needs in a way that is useful to the stakeholders involved with those children, especially parents and teachers. Recognizing that special education has become increasingly litigious, we also want those reports to reflect the ethical and legal demands and constraints put upon us by our professional standards as well as state and federal laws and regulations. Our position is that we can accomplish both and it is not necessary to sacrifice usefulness and accessibility to meet legal and ethical mandates. We take this a step further and argue that making our reports more accessible and useful to consumers will itself make them more ethical and legally compliant.

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We have written and read many psychological reports during careers that between us span over 40 years of experience as practitioners and 26 years as trainers of school psychologists. During that time, we estimate that we have written over a thousand psychological reports and read at least that many of our students' reports. As university trainers, we have also read reports from dozens of local school districts. Things have changed considerably over our careers. When Jeanne Anne began her first school psychology job in 1993, she created handwritten reports using a three-page template, essentially a psychological fill-in-the-blank format. When Michael began his career, several years before Jeanne Anne, his reports were also handwritten, but the fill-in-the-blank template was only two pages long. It is clear to us that these early efforts at representing children in a written document contained very little information that was useful to parents or educators. Currently, we work in an area of the country where 30- to 50-page reports based on highly detailed templates is the norm. Unfortunately, we often find these much longer documents still do not contain much that is truly useful to parents and teachers.

A few years ago, we took the ideas we had developed as practitioners and trainers and created a workshop that we then presented at local, state, and national conferences. To our surprise, these workshops were often filled to capacity, frequently with people sitting on the floor around the edges of the room. This taught us that although practitioners write many reports, they are not necessarily confident in their skills. We also discovered that practitioners write reports with a striking range of formats and lengths.

We have noted a trend toward writing longer, less comprehensible reports in the name of legal defensiveness. We believe that most of these reports have several problems that hinder their usefulness to readers and actually make them less legally defensible. For example, they often lack focus and cohesiveness, have little actual interpretation, do not provide useful recommendations, and use vocabulary that only professionals with graduate degrees could possibly understand. They are also typically full of boilerplate legal language that does not appear to serve any useful purpose, including that of making the assessment or report more legally defensive. In addition to this legal filler language, a concerned parent or teacher often has to wade through many vague and generic statements that could be about nearly any child assessed to discover useful information unique to the specific child they are concerned about.

One goal in writing this book is to push back against this trend. We challenge the notion that longer is better and that the way we conduct our assessments and write reports should be guided by fear of legal action. Simply put, we believe that an assessment that directly responds to the concerns of parents and teachers and a report that communicates the results of that assessment in a way that the reader can easily understand is not only best practice but also easier to legally defend than the 40- or 50-page monster reports we often see. This book represents our current best thinking about how to accomplish this. As we explain in detail

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later in the book, the model we propose is based on a synthesis of published research, an analysis of professional guidelines, reflections on our own experience writing reports and teaching report writing, and what one of our colleagues calls *PJs* (professional judgments).

In this book, we advocate for question-driven assessments and suggest that these questions serve to frame reports. In that spirit, we have structured the book in the same way. Each chapter begins with a question. For example, the title of this chapter is “Why is another book on report writing needed?” Following that, we have a series of sections and subsections that we conceptualize as follow-up questions and themes. *Theme statements* are concise statements that summarize the major finding of the information that follows. This also follows the structure we advocate for reports. In Chapter 1, the themes include: (a) Report writing is important; (b) Assessment and report writing consumes a lot of our time and is a fundamental task of school psychologists; and (c) Reports should clearly communicate important information to consumers that makes a difference in the lives of the children involved.

We have used many examples to illustrate our points throughout this book, including six sample reports in Appendix II. To preserve the confidentiality of those involved, we have changed all identifying information and used pseudonyms for the personal names, schools, school districts, and agencies discussed. To retain a level of authenticity, some examples contain actual assessment instruments. By including them in our examples, we are not endorsing or opposing the use of these instruments.

### REPORT WRITING IS IMPORTANT

Throughout this book, we will discuss assessment as well as report writing. The reason for this is that the two cannot be separated. As succinctly stated by Brown-Chidsey and Steege, “No assessment is likely to be useful until, or unless, the findings are communicated to those in a position to implement solutions” (2005, p. 267). The value of a well-designed and focused assessment is easily obscured by a poorly organized and written report and, conversely, a poorly designed assessment cannot be rescued by a beautifully written report. School psychology graduate programs pay considerable attention to assessment but, if judged by the practitioners who attend our workshops, less attention to report writing.

*Assessment* can be defined as the process of gathering information to inform decisions (Salvia, Ysseldyke, & Bolt, 2007). No matter your philosophy about what constitutes a valid or useful assessment, the process involves collecting and evaluating data for the purpose of responding to stakeholders’ questions and concerns, identifying needs and strengths, and making meaningful recommendations. These data are also used to make decisions regarding further assessment, diagnosis or disability classification, and instructional planning (Salvia, Ysseldyke, & Bolt, 2007; Sattler, 1992).

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We argue that report writing is a critical yet undervalued part of the evaluation process. Unfortunately, practitioners often view report writing as a perfunctory post-assessment task. The report is sometimes completed the night before or even minutes before a meeting, without giving team members, including parents, the opportunity to review the findings before making critical decisions about the student's education. Although they are frequently not given the same attention as other aspects of the assessment process, psychological reports are important because they become the basis for the multidisciplinary teams' decisions regarding eligibility for special education and the foundation for recommending services and intervention. In other words, reports guide all of the decisions and planning that follow an assessment.

## ASSESSMENT AND REPORT WRITING CONSUMES A LOT OF OUR TIME AND IS A FUNDAMENTAL TASK FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

School psychology is a relatively young profession. Fagan and Wise (2000) conceptually divided the developmental history of school psychology into two eras. The first era, approximately the end of the 19th century to midway through the 20th century, was marked by widespread school reform. Early-20th-century political and sociocultural influences, specifically compulsory education laws, the corresponding increase in public school enrollment, and the development of intelligence testing, opened the door for the quantification of learning and achievement. This set the stage for the standardization of children's progress in school (Cook, 1912; Frey, 2005; National Conference of State Legislators, 2007). During this period, many types of educational and psychological practitioners provided services within the school setting. These services typically focused on assessment and diagnosis of learning difficulties.

The second era, midcentury to present, has seen the development of school psychologists' professional identity and an expansion of specialized training programs. For the first time, the majority of professionals practicing as school psychologists were trained in programs specifically designed for school psychologists. Throughout both of these eras, psychological assessment, diagnosis, and specialized program placement were the dominant roles of school psychologists (Fagan, 1990).

The results of several surveys of practitioners done over the last 40 years reflect this conclusion. In 1970, Farling and Hoedt (1971) conducted the first nationwide survey of school psychologists with the goal of identifying issues, concerns, and trends in the field. Their findings suggest that at that time the roles and functions of school psychologists were largely defined by assessment-related activities such as student evaluations, report writing, and parent-teacher meetings.

With the 1975 passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (i.e., Public Law 94-142), it became public policy to educate children with disabilities at the public's expense.

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PL 94-142 guaranteed parents of students with disabilities the right to be actively involved in their child's educational planning. They had the right to request assessment and, for the first time, had access to their children's records, including psychological reports (Weddig, 1984). Opinions regarding the impact this would have on the practice of school psychology were at opposite ends of the spectrum. Some thought the legislation would lead to more time spent on testing and other assessment activities while others predicted that it would lead to more opportunities for an expanded model of practice (Goldwasser, Meyers, Christenson, & Graden, 1983).

Eight years after the passing of PL 94-142, Goldwasser, Meyers, Christenson, and Graden (1983) undertook a national survey investigating school psychologists' perceptions of the legislation's impact on their roles. Respondents answered questions regarding evaluation procedures, Individualized Education Program (IEP) team membership, changes in role and function, due process participation, future training needs, and overall effects of the legislation. Two factors had negative implications for the psychologists' ability to engage in a broader range of services: an increased focus on students with disabilities, leading to limited opportunities to engage in preventative measures; and an increase in paperwork and administrative tasks, also reducing the time to engage in a wider range of professional activities. Surprisingly, the researchers found that the legislation had minimal impact on the overall roles of the respondents. School psychologists still spent the majority of their time engaged in diagnostic evaluations and related activities.

Researchers found similar survey results over the next 20 years. Smith (1984) surveyed a nationwide, random sample of school psychologists practicing in public school settings. Results indicated the majority of the psychologists' time was spent in assessment (54%), followed by intervention (23%), and consultation (19%). According to the survey results, school psychologists desired a reduction in assessment-based activities and an increase in intervention and consultation. In their survey of school psychology practitioners, Hutton, Dubes, and Muir (1992) reported that 53% of school psychologists' time was spent on assessment-related activities.

Clearly, research on the roles and functions of school psychologists suggests that assessment and related activities, including report writing, has shaped our practice throughout our century-long history (Curtis, Hunley, & Grier, 2002; Farling & Hoedt, 1971; Gilman & Medway, 2007; Hutton, Dubes, & Muir, 1992; Smith, 1984). Although school psychologists have a broad range of skills, we continue to be engaged in assessment-related endeavors more than in all other direct and indirect services combined. Given this, we know that for the vast majority of school psychologists, daily practice is still closely connected with assessment, diagnosis, and classification of students (Merrell, Ervin, & Gimpel, 2006). Indeed, in their comprehensive discussion of school psychology, Fagan and Wise (2000) contend that school

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psychologists' expertise in assessment has been the foundation of advancement and success in our field.

Over the last half century, many practitioners and researchers have called for an expansion of the role of school psychologists (Goldwasser, Meyers, Christenson, & Graden, 1983; Reschley, 2000). Shinn (2002) reported that school psychologists want to broaden their roles by increasing the time spent in non-assessment-related activities such as implementing social-emotional interventions, academic progress monitoring, and direct assessment methods. In 2006, Harvey surveyed 500 randomly selected members of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Overall, the respondents indicated a desire to increase time spent outside of their traditional assessment role. Fifty-four percent of respondents wanted to increase their time spent in intervention progress monitoring, 48% wanted an increase in time spent on social and emotional interventions, and 56% wanted to increase their time spent in nontraditional assessment.

Given the longstanding and pervasive influence of assessment on the practice of school psychologists, the question is: Can this expertise be leveraged for more active involvement in prevention and intervention? NASP conceptualizes assessment as data-based decision making, and in the *Blueprint for Training and Practice III*, NASP defines competency in data-based decision making as the ability to accurately identify problems by gathering relevant data, then utilizing this integrated information in collaboration with others for better outcomes for students. NASP advocates for assessment to be conceptualized as a step in a problem-solving process that connects directly to prevention and intervention rather than a standalone activity (NASP, 2006).

We argue that psychological reports should reflect the dynamic nature of the problem-solving process and serve as a foundation for engaging in more consultation, prevention, and intervention. Bagnato (1980) has argued that psychological reports are the predominant way school psychologists demonstrate their value and effectiveness. The psychological report is a direct reflection of the quality and range of services school psychologists provide, and as the culminating activity of the problem-solving process, a well-conceptualized and well-written psychological report can be an important tool to expand our role and make our services more useful to parents and other educators.

## REPORTS SHOULD CLEARLY COMMUNICATE INFORMATION TO CONSUMERS THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF THE CHILDREN INVOLVED

In order to use reports as a tool to make ourselves more useful to parents and teachers, we must first understand what their purpose is. Ownby (1997) asserts that the purpose of a

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report is “to communicate assessment information in a fashion appropriate to the intended reader so that the reader’s work with the client is affected” (p. 29). Although many individuals, including school administrators, outside professionals, and perhaps legal counsel, may read an assessment report hoping to better understand a child’s strengths and needs, there is a strong argument that the most important consumers of psychological reports are the students’ parents and teachers (Hagborg & Aiello-Coultier, 1994; Harvey, 1997; Weddig, 1984). Parents and teachers are the “front line” in the life of a child and the people most likely to both need and benefit from the information derived from an assessment.

It makes intuitive sense that a primary goal of psychological reports is to provide information that helps the people who live and work with children better understand their needs. Stated a different way, the goal of reports is to explicitly answer questions posed by those who referred the child for an assessment and to provide concrete recommendations (Eberst & Genshaft, 1984; Teglas, 1983). Although NASP has been relatively silent in regard to professional standards for report writing, in their *Principles for Professional Ethics and Guidelines for the Provision of School Psychological Services* (2010) they propose that assessment findings should be presented in language clearly understood by the recipient and that written reports should support the recipients in their work or interactions with the child. As school psychologists, we are expected not only to conduct assessments that address specific referral questions and interpret our findings in a meaningful way, but also to communicate that meaning in writing in a manner that others can understand.

If our objectives are to assist with educational planning and positively influence consumers’ interactions with the student, we need to answer the question: How can we make the information in written psychological reports more useful and accessible to teachers and parents? Yet, the information needed to answer this question is sparse and not easily accessible (Ownby, 1997). For example, NASP has published a Best Practices in School Psychology series since 1985 (Thomas & Grimes, 1985), described as “a core resource on contemporary, evidence-based knowledge necessary for competent delivery of school psychological services” (NASP, 2009, para. 3). The first and second Best Practices editions had chapters dedicated to report writing but a chapter on report writing has not been included since the 1990 edition. This is despite the fact that with each new edition, the Best Practices volumes have grown exponentially, reaching 2,600 pages in the most recent fifth edition (Thomas & Grimes, 2008). These exclusions support our conviction that best practices are not clearly defined for report writing, a fundamental part of school psychologists’ practice.

Although the assumption that school psychologists should write understandable and useful psychological reports is reflected in the NASP *Principles for Professional Ethics and Guidelines for the Provision of School Psychological Services* (2010), there is little specific guidance on how to accomplish this. For example, NASP guidelines state that assessment findings should be

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presented in language clearly understood by the recipients and that written reports should emphasize interpretation and recommendations to support the recipients in their work or interactions with the child. NASP clearly states that reports solely focusing on test scores or global statements are rarely useful yet provides little information on what the alternatives to these statements might be. We believe that this lack of clear consensus on the part of our profession is one reason that there is so much variability in reports and perhaps why supervisors of school psychologists have turned to attorneys and other people outside the profession to seek guidance on the best way to structure and write reports.

In the following chapters, we hope to fill this gap. In doing so, we also hope that our readers will take ownership of this important professional skill and learn not only to communicate clearly but to use their reports as a way to leverage a wider and more effective professional role.

We believe that report writing needs to be conceptualized as a vital part of the assessment process. We promote the use of question-driven assessments and reports as not only legally defensible, but also more accessible and useful for their most important consumers: educators and parents. As previously mentioned, the book follows the structure of a question-driven report. Each chapter title is a question and the headings within each chapter are strategic thematic statements that summarize key points. In Chapter 1, we answered the question, Why is another book on report writing needed? In the remaining chapters we address the following four questions: Chapter 2, What makes a report legally defensible?; Chapter 3, How do I make my reports more useful to consumers?; Chapter 4, Step-by-step, how do I write useful and legally defensible reports?; and Chapter 5, How do I solve practical problems along the way to question-driven report writing? At the end of the book, appendixes are included that provide tools to support a transition to more useful and legally defensible report writing, including a checklist to tell if your report is useful and legally defensible, extensive examples, and an interview protocol.

### Chapter 1 Takeaway Points

- Although school psychologists have a broad range of skills, we continue to be engaged in assessment-related endeavors more than all other direct and indirect services combined.
- Psychoeducational reports are important because they become the basis for multidisciplinary teams' decisions regarding eligibility for special education and the foundation for recommending services and intervention.
- Report writing is a critical yet undervalued part of the evaluation process, often viewed as a perfunctory post-assessment task.



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- *The value of a well-designed and focused assessment can be easily obscured by a poorly organized and written report and, conversely, a poorly designed assessment cannot be rescued by a beautifully written report.*
- *We advocate for question-driven assessments and suggest that these questions serve to frame reports.*
- *The psychological report is a direct reflection of the quality and range of services school psychologists provide, and as the culminating activity of the problem-solving process, a well-conceptualized and well-written psychological report can be an important tool to expand our role and make our services more useful to parents and other educators.*

