



# Literacy Skills Checklist/Guide - Preparing for the NZ Literacy Co- requisite exams

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This checklist is designed to help you, as a parent or caregiver, understand the foundational writing and language skills your child needs to successfully prepare for the New Zealand Literacy Co-requisite exams.

## Who is this for?

This guide is for anyone, educators and parents of children in Years 4 to 8 who want to understand their child's literacy strengths and gaps in grammar, sentence structure, writing, and vocabulary. These skills are essential for meeting the expectations of the NCEA Literacy Co-requisite and should be developed well before high school.

## Why is this important?

The NCEA Co-requisite exams require strong reading and writing skills, including the ability to write with structure, use correct grammar, and comprehend a range of texts. Many of these foundational skills may not have been taught explicitly in earlier years, so it's important for families to be aware of them now.

Even if a reader/writer is or could be provided for your child in formal assessments, they will still need to be able to clearly explain their ideas, indicate where punctuation should go, and describe the structure of their writing. They must guide the adult on how they want their story or response to be written, including the correct grammar, vocabulary, and tone. This means they still need to understand these literacy skills themselves, even if someone else is writing it for them.

We need to start thinking about these skills now, not leave it up to secondary teachers, who are already under pressure. The more literacy knowledge and confidence we can give our kids early and I mean we, as parents working alongside teachers, the easier

their journey through school will be. Together, we can give our children the tools they need to succeed.

### Information from the DEB website

This checklist/ guide has been created by combining of links and pages of information from DEB website ([www.deb.co.nz](http://www.deb.co.nz)) to help you, as a parent or home educator, identify the writing and language skills your child already knows and the areas they may need more support with.

### How to use this document:

Not every child will need to be assessed on every skill listed in this checklist. It's important not to overwhelm your child with unnecessary assessments. The full list of skills has been included here simply for convenience, to help you see everything in one place. You may only need to focus on a few key areas at a time, depending on your child's age, strengths, and current needs. Use this as a flexible guide to support your child's development, not as a test to complete from start to finish. Go through each section with your child. Ask them to demonstrate the skill listed, either in writing, through conversation, or by completing a short task. If they are unsure or inconsistent, that's a sign the skill needs more support.

1. Go through one section at a time. Read the explanation under each heading first, it will help you understand what to look for.
2. Ask your child to demonstrate the skill listed, either in writing, through conversation, or by doing a short activity. You don't need to do it all in one day, take your time.
3. Tick the box if your child can do the skill confidently. If they are unsure, inconsistent, or don't understand the concept yet, leave it blank.
4. Make notes about any difficulties or questions you have. These can help you plan what to teach next or what to ask for help with.

### What does this cover?

This tool focuses on core foundational writing and language skills: handwriting, reading and spelling, grammar, word parts (morphology), sentence structure, and vocabulary.

### What if there are a lot of gaps?

That's okay! Every child has gaps, especially if writing has been a challenge. This checklist isn't a test; it's a guide to help you focus on what skills need to be taught, start a conversation with the teacher and/or look at getting the right resources.

### What next?

Once you know what your child needs to learn you can start creating a plan. The important thing is to start now, the earlier you support these skills, the more confident and prepared your child will be when it comes time to sit the literacy co-requisite exams.

Talk to your child's teacher about what you notice. Share this checklist with them if you think it will be helpful. You can also speak to the school's SENCO (Special Education Needs Coordinator) if your child needs additional support. Together, you can discuss what support might be offered in class and what you could reinforce at home.

Consider exploring options such as targeted resources, home-based support activities, or even working with a structured literacy tutor. A tutor with experience in supporting children with learning differences can help fill in gaps and boost confidence. The key is to act early, so your child builds strong skills step by step.

When schools and families work together, we can help our children succeed.

### What if my child is neurodivergent?

If your child is neurodivergent such as having ADHD, autism, dyslexia, or other learning differences, this checklist can still be a helpful guide. You may notice uneven skills or that some tasks feel harder than others. That's completely normal. Once you have the information you need the goal will be to focus on what your child *can* do, go at a pace that works for them, and adapt tasks to reduce overwhelm (e.g., use oral responses instead of writing, break activities into steps, or use visuals and prompts).

If your child is still attending school but seems frequently exhausted, overwhelmed, or is just "holding it together" to get through the day, it might be a sign they are experiencing neurodivergent burnout. This isn't about them not trying hard enough — it's about how much they can actually cope with. While most of the research focuses on autism, many in the wider neurodivergent (ND) community agree that burnout can affect all ND children, including those with ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning differences.

Recognising this can help you and your child's teacher work together to make thoughtful adjustments, like reducing demands, building in recovery time, and scaffolding learning. A document on autistic burnout is included with this checklist to help you understand what might be going on beneath the surface. Autistic Burnout Link <https://www.deb.co.nz/education/school/autistic-burnout-guide-for-parents-and-kids/>

# Diagnostic Assessment: Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Grammar, Sentence Structure, and Vocabulary

## Handwriting

Ask your child to write the lowercase and uppercase alphabet on lined paper. Observe letter formation, spacing, size, and whether they stay within the lines. You can also ask them to copy a short sentence.

Handwriting fluency supports automaticity, meaning your child can write without having to think hard about forming letters. This frees up mental energy for spelling, word choice, and organising ideas. Legible handwriting also helps with confidence and reduces fatigue when writing longer texts.

I recommend the free DEB Sound and Letter assessment to do this

<https://www.deb.co.nz/resource-hub/free-assessments/sounds-assessments/>

☐ Lowercase letters a–z

☐ Uppercase letters A–Z

## Reading and Spelling

The purpose of this assessment is to support you, as a parent or educator, in identifying your child's current literacy knowledge, and to help you see where there may be gaps. It's especially helpful for parents who feel unsure about what their child knows or how well they are progressing in reading and spelling. If you've ever found yourself thinking: **"I'm not sure what they've been taught," "I don't know where they're struggling,"** or **"I don't know how to help,"** — this assessment is for you.

Free Literacy Assessments on DEB website [www.deb.co.nz](http://www.deb.co.nz)

<https://www.deb.co.nz/resource-hub/free-assessments/reading-assessment/>

## Grammar

Talk through each grammar concept and ask your child to write or identify examples. For punctuation, have them mark where punctuation should go in a simple sentence. For contractions, ask them to use the word correctly in context.

Grammar underpins clear communication. It helps your child organise ideas, show relationships between ideas, and write sentences that are complete and correct. Strong

grammar also supports reading comprehension, because children understand how language is structured.

To understand what grammar is check out <https://www.deb.co.nz/dyslexia/getting-started/what-is-grammar/>

- ☐ Punctuation: Exclamation mark (e.g., Watch out!)
- ☐ Punctuation: Question mark (e.g., Are you coming?)
- ☐ Contractions (e.g., can't, won't, it's)
- ☐ Commas (e.g., I bought apples, bananas, and oranges.)
- ☐ Apostrophes (e.g., Ben's toy, don't)
- ☐ Abbreviations (St = Street, rd = road, etc = etcetera)

## Sentence Types

Teach your child to recognise and then write the four types of sentences: declarative (statements), interrogative (questions), imperative (commands), and exclamatory (strong feelings). You can give sentence starters or mix and match games.

Knowing sentence types gives your child flexibility in how they express thoughts and emotions. It also helps them understand tone, author's purpose, and different writing styles, important for both reading and writing success.

- ☐ Exclamatory sentences (e.g., That was amazing!)
- ☐ Imperative sentences (e.g., Please sit down.)
- ☐ Interrogative Question sentences (e.g., What time is it?)
- ☐ Declarative sentences (e.g., The sky is blue.)

## Basic Parts of Speech

Start with simple sentences and ask your child if they know what a noun and verb is then to doublecheck them to mark them in a sentence (e.g., underline the noun, circle the verb, only do this to assess knowledge not as a teaching strategy). Gradually add more types of words. Understanding parts of speech builds sentence awareness and

helps your child choose the right words. It also supports sentence expansion. This is foundational for accurate writing, editing, and understanding how texts work in reading.

- ☐ Common Nouns (e.g., dog, house, book)
- ☐ Proper Nouns (e.g., dog, house, book)
- ☐ Verbs (e.g., run, jump, swim)
- ☐ Adjectives (e.g., blue, tall, happy)
- ☐ Adverbs (e.g., quickly, very, always)
- ☐ Pronouns (e.g., he, she, they)
- ☐ Article (e.g., a, an, the)

### **Oral to Written Sentence Structure**

Ask your child to explain or write about something familiar using prompts: Who is involved? What happened? When and where? Why did it happen? Use visuals, story maps, or speaking before writing to support planning.

Moving from spoken ideas to written sentences supports narrative and informative writing. This process helps with organisation, clarity, and coherence in writing and reinforces comprehension strategies when reading.

- ☐ What (e.g., ...kicked the ball.)
- ☐ When (e.g., Yesterday, In the morning)
- ☐ Where (e.g., at the park)
- ☐ Why (e.g., because he was excited)
- ☐ Problem (e.g., The car broke down.)
- ☐ Understand Subject and Verb sentence extension / WHO and DO sentence (e.g., The dog barked.)

## Sentence Structures

First ask if your child understands what the concepts mean, then review a short writing sample together. Can your child use and recognise different sentence types, simple, compound, and complex? Practice combining ideas with conjunctions like 'because' and 'but'.

Sentence variety improves readability and engagement in writing. It also shows a deeper understanding of how language works, supporting higher-level comprehension in texts. It will also assess if your child uses run on sentences in their writing.

- ☐ Simple Sentences (e.g., I went home.)
- ☐ Extended Sentences (e.g., I went home and played games.)
- ☐ Conjunctions (e.g., and, but, because)
- ☐ Dependent and Independent Clauses (e.g., Because it rained, we stayed inside.)
- ☐ Compound Sentences (e.g., I was late, but I still caught the bus.)
- ☐ Complex Sentences (e.g., Although it was cold, she went outside.)

This document can help with definitions [https://tataiangitu.ac.nz/2025/06/13/sentence-definitions-matter-respect-the-clause/?fbclid=IwY2xjawLIXjpleHRuA2FlbQlxMABicmlkETFxNTRMOU5qVXc0clRuWGNiAR7njj1bf4GSbrfAjBQ6ckw8J0xfaNW3mLE4x9mK9kcj270H92XR-c\\_kKJ8tgA\\_aem\\_GBSF8iLejt8cLrRjbmr0MA](https://tataiangitu.ac.nz/2025/06/13/sentence-definitions-matter-respect-the-clause/?fbclid=IwY2xjawLIXjpleHRuA2FlbQlxMABicmlkETFxNTRMOU5qVXc0clRuWGNiAR7njj1bf4GSbrfAjBQ6ckw8J0xfaNW3mLE4x9mK9kcj270H92XR-c_kKJ8tgA_aem_GBSF8iLejt8cLrRjbmr0MA)

## Subordination and Coordination Conjunctions

Present simple sentences and model how to connect them using words like 'because', 'so', or 'and'. Then ask your child to try linking two ideas using those words. Encourage them to explain their reasoning.

These connecting words show how ideas relate to each other. They build logic and flow in writing and are key for understanding cause and effect, comparisons, and reasoning in reading.

- ☐ Coordination: But (e.g., I wanted to go, but I was tired.)
- ☐ Coordination: So (e.g., It rained, so we stayed in.)
- ☐ Coordination: For (e.g., He went to bed, for he was tired.)

- ☐ Coordination: And (e.g., I ate and went to bed.)
- ☐ Coordination: Or (e.g., Do you want tea or coffee?)
- ☐ Coordination: Yet (e.g., It's late, yet I'm not tired.)
- ☐ Coordination: Nor (e.g., He didn't call, nor did he write.)

## Vocabulary

Discuss common synonyms (words that mean the same) and antonyms (opposites). Use word pairs or play games where your child matches words or uses them in different sentences.

Strong vocabulary helps your child understand what they read and express themselves clearly when writing. It also supports inference, comprehension, and more descriptive and persuasive writing.

To learn more, I recommend reading <https://www.deb.co.nz/dyslexia/getting-started/what-is-background-knowledge-and-vocabulary/>

- ☐ Synonyms (e.g., happy/joyful, quick/fast)
- ☐ Antonyms (e.g., hot/cold, big/small)

You can use this vocabulary list as a **quick check** to see if your child recognises and understands a range of age-appropriate words. These words are commonly used across school subjects, especially in reading materials, written tasks, and test instructions.

Here are some simple ways to use the list:

1. Read each word aloud and ask your child to explain what it means in their own words.
2. Or ask them to use the word in a sentence, either spoken or written.
3. Check their understanding of related words if relevant (e.g., root word, prefix, suffix, antonym, synonym).

[https://cdn.oxfordowl.co.uk/2019/08/29/13/56/09/5a42eb6a-f57f-4dc4-a66e-bd4c5e27e4b7/SpellingWordList\\_Y5-6.pdf](https://cdn.oxfordowl.co.uk/2019/08/29/13/56/09/5a42eb6a-f57f-4dc4-a66e-bd4c5e27e4b7/SpellingWordList_Y5-6.pdf)



## Paragraph Writing

Ask your child to write a short paragraph (4–6 sentences) about a familiar topic. You can give a prompt like “Describe your favourite day” or “Explain how to care for a pet.” Then review it together using the checklist below.

Paragraph writing pulls together many writing skills, organising ideas, using correct grammar and punctuation, and linking sentences. It’s a key skill for essays, reports, and everyday written communication.

- ☐ Has a clear topic sentence that tells what the paragraph is about
- ☐ Includes at least 2–3 supporting sentences with detail or explanation
- ☐ Sentences are in a logical order
- ☐ Uses linking words or transitions (e.g., also, because next)
- ☐ Follows basic punctuation and grammar rules
- ☐ Ends with a concluding sentence or summary
- ☐ Stays on one main idea throughout the paragraph

## Morphology

The checklist provided is a basic tool to help you check whether your child understands that parts of words carry meaning. It can show whether your child recognises common prefixes, suffixes, and plural endings, and whether they are beginning to break words apart to figure out what they mean. Ask your child if they know what each affix means, or how it changes the meaning of the word it’s added to.

**Prefix:** Letters added to the **beginning** of a word that change its meaning.

*Example: “re-” in “replay” means “again”.*

**Suffix:** Letters added to the **end** of a word that change its meaning or function.

*Example: “-ful” in “joyful” means “full of”.*

**Base or Root Word:** The core part of the word that carries its main meaning.

*Example: “help” is the base in “helpful”, “helpless”, and “helper”.*

For example:

What does “re-” mean in “replay”?

What happens to the word “care” when we add “-ful”?

This awareness lays the foundation for stronger reading, writing, and vocabulary skills.

✓	Affix	Examples	Meaning of Affix / Word Change
<input type="checkbox"/>	Prefix: RE-	redo, replay	again (e.g., do again, play again)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Plural: S/ES	cats, boxes	more than one
<input type="checkbox"/>	Suffix: -ING	running, swimming	action happening now
<input type="checkbox"/>	Suffix: -ER	faster, teacher	more (adj) / person who (noun)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Prefix: DIS-	dislike, disconnect	not, opposite of, apart
<input type="checkbox"/>	Prefix: PRE-	preview, preschool	before
<input type="checkbox"/>	Suffix: -EST	biggest, fastest	the most
<input type="checkbox"/>	Suffix: -LY	quickly, happily	in a ____ way
<input type="checkbox"/>	Suffix: -LESS	hopeless, fearless	without
<input type="checkbox"/>	Suffix: -FUL	joyful, careful	full of
<input type="checkbox"/>	Prefix: UN-	unhappy, unlock	not / opposite of

## Support for Parents and Students

Trying to learn, teach, and fill in gaps in writing and grammar can feel overwhelming especially if you're learning it yourself as you go. That's why I recommend this **Writing Cheat Sheet**, created by me for my own Year 7 son. It was designed to help scaffold his writing tasks and give him a quick, friendly reminder of key concepts. This resource is both parent and student-friendly, with clear explanations and examples of important writing and grammar skills. **It's free to download and can be found at the Google Drive link included here.** It's a great companion to this checklist and can support more confident, independent writing at home.

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-Zw63x3YTmlOD4bh5i2e0-UstkAo\\_vaZ?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-Zw63x3YTmlOD4bh5i2e0-UstkAo_vaZ?usp=drive_link)

## Other Literacy Skills to Observe or Check

Beyond decoding and spelling, it's helpful to look at your child's broader literacy skills. These don't always show up in standard assessments but are just as important for success in reading and writing. Use the list below as a guide to notice what your child can do independently or with support:

☐ Can they use a physical (hard copy) dictionary?

☐ Do they understand alphabetical order and how to find word meanings?

☐ Can they use a (hard copy) thesaurus?

☐ Can they find and choose suitable synonyms to improve their writing?

☐ Can they take notes to plan writing?

This could be in the form of keywords, short phrases, or a quick outline before writing paragraphs or stories.

☐ Do they know the different types of writing?

For example: narrative, persuasive, descriptive, informative/expository. Can they name or identify these?

☐ Have they been exposed to a variety of reading genres?

Such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry, biographies, news articles, instructions, or playscripts. Exposure builds background knowledge and strengthens comprehension.

☐ Can they summarise what they've read or learned?

☐ Can they retell the main idea or describe key details in their own words?

☐ Do they ask questions or make predictions while reading?

This shows active engagement and growing comprehension skills.

☐ Can they identify who the audience is in a piece of writing?

☐ Ask if they are reading or being read a wide range of books, including different genres to build vocabulary, background knowledge, and comprehension. These might include Realistic fiction, Historical fiction, Science fiction, Fantasy, Adventure, Mystery, Horror (age-appropriate), Poetry, Biography and autobiography, Graphic novels, Myths and legends, Non-fiction texts (science, history, geography), Speeches and persuasive texts, News articles and opinion pieces.

This Link will provide more information <https://www.deb.co.nz/resource-hub/curriculum-choices/free-resources/quality-stories-books/>

## Using UK Resources to Gauge Your Child's Literacy Skills (For NZ Parents)

In England, students complete their end-of-primary SATs exams in Year 6, which is the equivalent of Year 7 in New Zealand. These assessments cover areas such as reading comprehension, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and maths.

You can find many free past SATs papers online, and they can be a useful tool to help you understand what your child can and can't yet do. These are particularly helpful if you're unsure about their current skill level or if they've had gaps in learning.

You might want to explore:

- **Past SATs Papers online** – Free to download and easy to use at home.
- **CGP Books** – A trusted UK publisher offering free assessments and affordable revision books. <https://www.cgpbooks.co.uk/resources/primary-sats-resources>
- **Pearson Edexcel English Achievement Test** – A more structured diagnostic test that can help you check reading and writing skills. A link is included in the resources section.  
<https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/International-Primary-Curriculum/English/2011/Specification-and-sample-assessments/InternationalPrimaryCurriculum-English-Year6-Booklet.pdf>

### Important Notes for NZ Parents

Please only use these assessments as a guide. They are not designed specifically for New Zealand learners and may include content or formats that feel unfamiliar, especially if your child hasn't experienced formal testing like this before. In New Zealand, most schools do not provide standardised assessments like this, so for many children this may be their first time sitting a test-style activity. That's absolutely fine, but it's important to:

- **Talk them through the process first**
- **Explain what to do if they don't know an answer**
- **Remind them this is not about passing or failing it's about seeing what they know**

Also, if the paper refers to a "a certain amount of time to complete a section" feel free to skip or ignore those instructions for now. Your goal is not to replicate a formal exam it's simply to gather a clearer picture of their knowledge and areas for support.

Created By Sharon Scurr 24 July 2025