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# A C.L.E.A.R. Approach to Report Writing: A Framework for Improving the Efficacy of Psychoeducational Reports

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Sarah M. Mastoras<sup>1</sup>, Emma A. Climie<sup>1</sup>,  
Adam W. McCrimmon<sup>1</sup>, and  
Vicki L. Schwean<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Psychoeducational reports are the primary means for a school psychologist to communicate the results of an assessment. Although reports should be written in the most efficient and reader-friendly manner, this is not always the case. Additionally, problems in report writing have remained relatively consistent for several decades, despite recommendations on how reports should be improved. The focus of the current article is to provide an integrated and easily implemented framework for improving psychoeducational reports based on the evidence and broad recommendations currently available in the literature. Specifically, the C.L.E.A.R. Approach to report writing for practitioners is presented, with practical strategies and examples provided to illustrate the use of the model in a school-based setting.

## Résumé

Le rapport psycho-éducatif est la méthode primaire pour un psychologue d'école afin de communiquer ses résultats obtenus lors d'une évaluation. Ce rapport doit être écrit de façon simple et précis, malheureusement, ce n'est pas toujours ce qui est observé.

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<sup>1</sup>University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

<sup>2</sup>University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada

## Corresponding Author:

Adam McCrimmon, Educational Studies in School Psychology, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive, N.W., Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4.

Email: [a.mccrimmon@ucalgary.ca](mailto:a.mccrimmon@ucalgary.ca)

En effet, certaines difficultés face aux rapports psycho-éducatifs sont demeurées constantes au cours des années, malgré les nombreuses recommandations suggérées. Le but de la recherche présentée ici, consiste à fournir un modèle d'encadrement facile à implanter et à intégrer. Ceci permettra d'améliorer les rapports puisqu'ils sont basés sur les preuves et les vastes recommandations qui sont actuellement disponibles dans la littérature. Spécifiquement, l'accent sera mis sur l'approche "C.L.E.A.R.". Cette approche présente des stratégies pratiques ainsi que des exemples illustrant l'utilisation de ce modèle dans un environnement scolaire.

### **Keywords**

assessment, psychoeducational reports, report writing, improvement

One of the primary roles of school psychologists is to conduct standardized assessments. Such assessments may be requested to establish a diagnosis, identify reasons for current challenges, evaluate change or progress in a child's functioning, or suggest educational placements or supports (Sattler, 2008). Regardless of the purpose or specific referral question, assessments are intended to provide important information about a child's functioning to parents, teachers, and other professionals. The primary means of communicating this information is the psychoeducational report. However, to be of value in informing those working with the child, the report must be understandable and meaningful to its readers.

Harvey (2006) has emphasized three specific purposes of psychological reports. First, reports describe the current ability level of a client. Reports are read by key individuals associated with the client (e.g., parents, teachers) to help increase their understanding of the person's abilities. Second, psychological reports communicate recommendations and interventions that may support the client in areas of difficulty. These recommendations should be clearly communicated and practically relevant so they are able to be implemented with little difficulty. Third, psychological reports support improvement in clients' functioning. Specifically, the information obtained from a psychological assessment can be used to support and increase an individual's overall functioning, especially in areas of skill deficiency.

From a school-based perspective, psychoeducational assessment reports are important in understanding the difficulties that individual students are experiencing. Specifically, these reports address areas of student strength and difficulty and should provide the classroom and resource teachers with suggestions and recommendations to help support students in the school environment (e.g., academically, socially, emotionally, behaviorally). These findings and recommendations are often given substantial weight in terms of decision-making and program planning and may feed directly into the creation of an Individualized Program Plan (IPP) or Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that is used to support learning.

## Effective Reports

Appelbaum (1970) characterized effective report writing as requiring a combination of science and art. That is, in addition to the psychologist's task of interpreting and integrating findings, report writers must engage in the art of persuasion, "in getting from one mind to the mind of another desired understandings and consequent inclinations to action" (p. 350). It is through this persuasion and salesmanship of results that reports achieve practical value.

Effective reports should present assessment data in a clear and concise manner and include practical, understandable, and appropriate recommendations (Brenner, 2003; Harvey, 2006; Whitaker, 1995). Additionally, a child-centered writing style, which focuses on description of the client rather than test instruments or obtained scores, considers the reader and his or her comprehension of the information in the report (Schwean et al., 2006). Ultimately, the effectiveness of psychological reports may be determined by the extent to which they produce meaningful change in understanding and supporting the referred client (Ownby & Wallbrown, 1983).

*Consumer preferences in psychoeducational reports.* Brenner (2003) has highlighted the importance of a *consumer-focus* in increasing the clinical utility of psychoeducational assessments. Understanding and effectively addressing the concerns, questions, and needs of the referring individual, whether that is a teacher or parent, will support the value and ongoing relevance of psychoeducational reports within the school system. A handful of studies have specifically examined the preferences of typical readers of psychoeducational reports and can be used to inform report-writing practices (e.g., Weddig, 1984; Wiener, 1985, 1987).

Not surprisingly, teachers are one of the primary consumers of psychoeducational reports. Wiener (1985, 1987) has investigated the comprehension of psychoeducational reports from the teacher perspective. These studies involved school administrators, elementary teachers, and secondary school teachers. Similar results were found across all three groups, whereby the school-based professionals preferred reports that provided specific and detailed descriptions of the child and his or her behaviors, as well as recommendations that could be practically implemented. Elementary teachers and school administrators also preferred reports that were written in a clear and succinct manner. These findings were substantiated in a more recent study conducted by Pelco, Ward, Coleman, and Young (2009), who reported that teachers preferred reports in which the results were organized by themes rather than in a test-by-test format. Additionally, teachers rated reports with a lower reading grade level (e.g., Grade 8) as being the most teacher friendly.

Parents also have access to psychoeducational reports and are often directly involved in providing support and intervention based on report recommendations. Wiener and Kohler (1986) found that parents not only preferred, but were also better able to comprehend, reports that were organized by domain (e.g., cognitive abilities,

attentional abilities) than by specific tests. As well, parents preferred slightly longer reports that clearly described children's learning styles, their strengths and limitations, and detailed and specific recommendations. Reports that noted a clear link between the referral question and corresponding answers were also favored. Weddig (1984) reported that parents who read a modified psychoeducational report with less jargon and written at a lower reading level were also better able to comprehend specific details regarding their child's report, regardless of the parents' educational level.

## Current Challenges in Effective Report Writing

Despite these findings regarding the preferences and needs of readers of psychoeducational reports, a number of problems with reports have been identified in the literature. Some of the primary issues include poor readability, generic interpretation, test-by-test reporting, focus on client weaknesses, report length, and poor links between the referral questions and the results and recommendations (see Beutler & Groth-Marnat, 2003; Brenner, 2003; Groth-Marnat, 2003a, 2003b; Groth-Marnat & Horvath, 2006; Harvey, 1997, 2006). Interestingly, these issues closely mirror similar concerns that were identified more than four decades ago (e.g., Appelbaum, 1970; Forer, 1959; Foster, 1951; Holzbert, Alessi, & Wexler, 1951; Lodge & How, 1953; Rucker, 1967a; Sargent, 1951; Tallent, 1958), highlighting the limited gains that have been made despite numerous suggestions and recommendations.

**Readability.** The issue of report readability has been noted as a limiting factor by a number of researchers (e.g., Brenner, 2003; Groth-Marnat, 2009; Groth-Marnat & Horvath, 2006; Harvey, 1997, 2006). Specific concerns have been raised regarding overall writing style (e.g., sentence length, word complexity), as well as frequent use of technical jargon and acronyms. It is important to remember that psychoeducational reports are read not only by other mental health professionals but also by teachers, parents, courts, and often the clients themselves. As such, reports should be written at a level that can be understood by most individuals. However, despite this recommendation, Harvey (2006) noted that most psychological reports are typically written at a 15- to 16-year educational reading level (i.e., equivalent to a senior undergraduate or graduate level). Moreover, even models of reports provided in graduate textbooks are written at a Grade 13 or higher level (Harvey, 2006). This reading level is substantially higher than the typical nonprofessional whose educational levels are generally lower (e.g., Grade 12 or less). Harvey (1997) found that approximately 72% of parents of evaluated children had less than 12 years of education, further emphasizing the need for psychological reports to be accessible and readable.

**Report length.** The length of a psychological report can be intimidating for parents or teachers, and it is intuitive that readers would prefer shorter, more concise reports to elaborate lengthy ones. Report length often varies as a function of the number of assessment measures administered and the amount of detail provided by the practitioner. Donders (1999, 2001) reported that the average psychological report is approximately five to seven single-spaced pages in length. Other researchers have found a

wider range of report length, with Horvath, Logan, Walker, and Juhasz (2000) reporting that custody evaluation reports range from a single page to 54 pages. Some practitioners choose to focus on the core results of an assessment and report their findings in a short, succinct manner whereas others opt for more comprehensive reports, including thorough explanations of observational assessments, behaviors, results, summary, and recommendations, often far exceeding the five to seven page average. In her research regarding report preferences of both teachers and parents, Wiener (1985, 1987; Wiener & Kohler, 1986) indicated that both of these groups of individuals preferred descriptive reports that integrated information in an easily understood manner regardless of length. However, report length should still be taken into consideration, as it may be an issue once it exceeds five to seven pages (Wiener, personal communication).

**Generic interpretation.** It is important for psychologists to connect the findings of the assessment directly to the client. Groth-Marnat (2009) noted that this issue is often one of the biggest challenges for novice report writers (e.g., students), adding that it is necessary for clinicians to expand the interpretations into information that relates to the client and his or her life. When reports include generic interpretation regarding test results (e.g., “A low score on the Processing Speed Index on the WISC-IV may indicate difficulties in processing information rapidly”), specific considerations regarding the individual client are not considered. Certainly, in-depth and sufficient interpretation of results that enables the reader to understand better the client’s functioning is a goal to which all professionals should aspire.

**Test-by-test results.** Psychoeducational reports are often written in a “fragmented” form, whereby the results and interpretation focus more on tests and test scores and less on the client. For example, many reports present results test by test, report irrelevant information, and use excessive jargon in interpretation. This style of writing is often reported to be difficult to understand and can increase the perceived distance between a client and practitioner (Ackerman, 2006). However, as this writing style is more efficient from the psychologist’s perspective, many practitioners continue to write reports in this format despite the fact that doing so often reduces the likelihood of the report being read in its entirety (Ackerman, 2006).

**Client weaknesses.** Many reports focus on the deficits of individuals and emphasize the things that they cannot do well. Indeed, referral questions often focus on behaviors and tasks with which the individual is having difficulty (e.g., “attentional concerns” or “poor basic mathematical skills”), and the tendency is for the practitioner to identify or confirm the areas of weakness of an individual (Snyder, Ritschel, Rand, & Berg, 2006). Given that clients have significant access to their reports, reading a deficit-focused report can be discouraging for the client and may instill feelings of frustration with the mental health system and isolation from the practitioner (Groth-Marnat & Horvath, 2006; Snyder et al., 2006). This approach provides a deficit-focused picture of the client and emphasizes what they do poorly rather than identifying areas of strength that may be useful in planning interventions.

**Poor links to referral questions.** It is important for a psychoeducational report to clearly identify the referral question(s), provide evidence that these questions have

been queried, and report comprehensive answers to these referral questions (Groth-Marnat, 2009). These answers should be easily found within the report. However, as indicated by Groth-Marnat (2009), it is apparent that this practice is not always accomplished in report writing and often results in confusing and unclear reports that do not allow the reader to gain a clear understanding of the assessment results. Ultimately, clients have accessed assessment services to answer a specific concern or set of concerns. Failing to directly answer this question may result in the report being meaningless to the client or other interested parties and may cause an unresponsive attitude to other relevant findings. Experiences of this sort can quickly establish a negative impression of psychologists as useless in providing information and support where it is needed (Finn & Tonsager, 1997).

### **Reasons for Ongoing Concerns in Psychological Reports**

Although many authors have called for changes to the current report-writing paradigm, these changes appear to remain idealisms that are frequently not put into practice. Moreover, research suggests that many professionals believe that they write clear and accessible reports, though clarity is inconsistently achieved when rated objectively or by typical readers of reports (Donaldson, McDermott, Hollands, Copley, & Davidson, 2004; Harvey, 2006). The question that remains is why these problems continue to occur despite having been clearly and repeatedly identified in the literature.

One factor that has been identified as contributing to ongoing report writing concerns involves the training practices and opportunities within graduate programs (Harvey, 2006). For instance, Harvey discovered that graduate students embraced the importance of writing understandable reports but had not been taught or provided examples of how to do so. As well, graduate students noted a desire to impress their supervisors with technical writing and even felt that writing at a higher level indicated to the reader that the student was educated and knowledgeable in their area of expertise. A second contributing factor that has been raised involves failure to evaluate reports on a case-by-case basis (Ownby & Wallbrown, 1983). Psychologists are unlikely to receive specific feedback or suggestions directly from the readers of reports. Moreover, given the limited time available for report writing among the many responsibilities of school psychologists, efforts to self-evaluate reports may also be uncommon and perceived as impractical and inefficient (Harvey, 2006).

In addition to these notable concerns, it can be argued that the continued challenges in producing effective psychological reports are in part a result of poor organization of recommendations currently available in the literature, which render this information largely inaccessible to psychologists in practice. That is, without a clear and simple framework to serve as an easy reference, psychologists do not have the time to peruse and recall the numerous and varied recommendations that have been put forth. Moreover, many of the ideas are broad in nature, providing global suggestions rather

than specific and efficient strategies for implementing evidence-based report writing into everyday practice.

Given the difficulties that practitioners, particularly school psychologists, have had with writing accessible reports, it is apparent that further insight and guidance into effective and efficient report writing is needed. The goal of this article is to provide a practical framework and specific strategies for implementing a number of recommended report-writing practices. Specifically, the following sections will provide an overview of the C.L.E.A.R. Approach to report writing and its implications for psychological practice. It is important to note that numerous other authors have outlined the typical structure of psychological reports and described the specific information that should be included in each section (e.g., Goldfinger & Pomerantz, 2010; Salend & Salend, 1985; Sattler, 2008; Schwean et al., 2006). The structure of reports will not be discussed here and readers are referred to these and other resources for specific suggestions in this regard.

## **The C.L.E.A.R. Approach**

The C.L.E.A.R. Approach is intended to provide an organized and accessible framework for achieving more effective and consumer-focused psychological reports. It is based on a set of five core principles that have been derived from a review of extant empirical and conceptual literature on report-writing (e.g., Appelbaum, 1970; Brenner, 2003; Groth-Marnat, 2009; Groth-Marnat & Horvath, 2006). Specifically, these principles have been chosen based on best-practice and evidence-based recommendations for producing reports that are understandable, meaningful, relevant, and persuasive.

The principles of the C.L.E.A.R. Approach are not new, but the approach is proposed as an integrated framework that can serve as a reference for practitioners. Highlighting what have been emphasized as the most important and influential factors in effective report writing allows practitioners and psychologists-in-training to have a practical and easily recalled guideline for making their reports more reader friendly and usable by those implementing the findings and recommendations. In addition, to promote the use of such guidelines in practice, each core principle has been supplemented with a set of practical strategies that support practitioners in implementing this approach in their daily practice. In line with recent arguments that reports are often viewed by more than one primary reader and must be transportable between audiences (Ackerman, 2006; Brenner, 2003), the principles and strategies outlined below are intended to be applicable for reports geared to a broad range of audiences.

### *The C.L.E.A.R. Approach to Psychological Report Writing*

The C.L.E.A.R. Approach to report writing attempts to integrate findings and suggestions for improvement in psychological report writing. Each letter refers to a specific

**Table 1.** The C.L.E.A.R. Approach to Report Writing

Report writing concept	Description of the concept
Child-centered perspective	Emphasis is placed on individualized (rather than generic) description of the client's abilities and less on scores and numbers. Information is organized by theme rather than test-by-test.
Link referral questions, assessment results, and recommendations	Information pertaining to the referral question(s), results, and recommendations is explicitly linked so the reader is better informed about the purpose, results, and outcomes of the assessment.
Enable the reader with concrete recommendations	A smaller number of concrete, realistic, and implementable recommendations are preferred over a large number of vague suggestions. Use of the S.M.A.R.T. approach can ensure that recommendations are easily implemented.
Address strengths as well as weaknesses	A report that provides a balanced description of strengths and weaknesses is better received by stakeholders and provides rich information pertaining to the specific and overall abilities of clients.
Readability	Ensuring that reports are written at a level easily understood by most readers (e.g., Grade 12) will ensure that readers comprehend the information in the report and are better able to implement suggested recommendations.

aspect that psychologists must consider in the creation of psychoeducational reports. These concepts are provided in a checklist format in Table 1.

- Child-centered perspective
- Link referral questions, assessment results, and recommendations
- Enable the reader with concrete recommendations
- Address strengths as well as weaknesses
- Readability

### *Implementing the C.L.E.A.R. Approach to Report Writing*

#### *Child-centered perspective.*

Reports written from a child-centered perspective are inherently more meaningful than those written from a test-centered approach because they aim to discuss the child in his or her natural context. This approach places emphasis on how assessment results depict the child's strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, such an approach stresses the

use of individualized rather than generic interpretations and conclusions, thereby addressing one of the prominent concerns in report writing described above (Schwean et al., 2006).

A child-centered report is a goal to which all professionals should aspire. However, as Schwean et al. (2006) note, many clinicians believe they are writing from a child-focused perspective but in fact, emphasize test data and analysis more than the child's qualities. Given this discrepancy and seemingly limited self-awareness regarding the written products psychologists produce, the purpose of including this principle within the C.L.E.A.R. Approach is to remind psychologists of the importance of this perspective and to provide specific strategies for implementing a child-centered report.

*Theme-based reports.* One method of promoting a child-centered report is to organize the report thematically rather than test-by-test (Beutler & Groth-Marnat, 2003). Such an approach presents assessment results by *domain* (e.g., cognitive, academic, memory) rather than by test. For example, if a child is referred to a psychologist to examine his or her attentional abilities, an important domain to include in the report would be "Attention." Within this domain, the practitioner would report on all measures that identify levels of attention, such as the Developmental Neuropsychological Assessment—Second Edition (NEPSY-II), Conners Continuous Performance Task—Second Edition (CPT-II), Conner's Rating Scale—Third Edition (Conners-3), and Behavior Assessment Scale for Children—Second Edition (BASC-2). Thematically integrated reports focus less on tests and test scores and more on how the results describe the individual client.

From the psychologists' perspective, a test-by-test writing approach may be considered more efficient as it requires little prewriting organization effort. However, such an approach often places the burden of integration on the reader and in many cases, may leave the reader unable to comprehend information in a meaningful way. As a result, the test-by-test format may ultimately undermine the overall efficacy of the report by limiting its usability in supporting the child. Several studies have identified the theme-based approach as preferred and more understandable by typical readers of reports (e.g., Pelco et al., 2009; Wiener & Kohler, 1986). For instance, Pelco et al. (2009) demonstrated that teachers learn more from theme-based reports, find them more teacher friendly, and report that they better explain the child's difficulties. The authors argued that theme-based reports promote better comprehension because "the integration serves to help the reader organize and accurately encode new information, retrieve relevant prior knowledge, and/or transfer knowledge to new situations" (pp. 24-25).

In writing a child-centered and theme-based report, it is recommended that psychologists first create an outline of the primary domains assessed. This process may include broad categories (e.g., cognitive, academic, behavioral, and socioemotional) or may be further delineated into specific constructs (e.g., memory, executive functioning, or visual perception). This outline can then be used to organize findings from various measures or assessment methods that describe the child as fully as is possible within the parameters of the assessment. Within each section, individual results can be described and then easily and clearly integrated to provide a holistic picture of the

child's functioning within that domain. Moreover, this framework allows the psychologist to more clearly address and resolve discrepancies or acknowledge where this cannot be done, a practice deemed important and ethically responsible (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005; Goldfinger & Pomerantz, 2010).

Where theme-based report writing is not possible, for instance, when specified formats are required within the agency, integration and a child focus can be maintained by alternative methods. Essentially, a test-based organization does not necessitate a test-based writing style. Methods for preserving a child focus include organizing tests in a logical order that combines related abilities and closely approximates a theme-based approach and providing "checkpoints" or summaries after several tests measuring similar abilities where results are explicitly integrated and interpreted as a whole and any discrepancies are addressed. These approaches also avoid score-focused wording such as "this score indicates" or "people with these profiles" (Groth-Marnat, 2009) and ensure that information is integrated and presented in a manner that is best understood by the reader.

*Supplementation of scores.* The issue of whether scores should be reported at all is a controversial one and has been discussed in depth (Groth-Marnat & Horvath, 2006). Ultimately, reporting some basic scores can provide insight to other professionals and can even serve to provide normative information to the reader regarding the level of strength or weakness relative to others of that developmental stage. Nonetheless, from a child-centered perspective, only those scores that contribute to a stronger understanding of the child should be reported (Schwean et al., 2006). More importantly, "data become information only after they are given meaning" (Schwean et al., 2006, p. 381). Supplementation of scores requires the writer to move beyond the scores to provide interpretation and real-life context. In fact, teachers have been found to prefer interpretive rather than factual (i.e., quantitative) statements, suggesting a desire for the clinical judgment and expertise of the psychologist (Salvagno & Teglasi, 1987).

One technique for emphasizing meaningful, child-centered interpretations is to begin each paragraph or test result section with a brief overview of the relevant scores, which is then followed by more in-depth discussion of their relevance (as opposed to moving back and forth between score and interpretive statement). In framing interpretations, report writers can integrate discussions of performance on several tasks or standardized measures with relevant assessment observations or reports from the child's natural environments to form conclusions that are specific to the child and meaningful to the reader's experience. As well, real-life examples of the skill being evaluated that are applicable to the child's context can be used to clarify and increase the relevance of findings (Donaldson et al., 2004). For example,

Joe performed in the Average range on a word definitions task. In contrast, he performed in the Borderline range on tasks requiring him to make meaningful associations between concepts or engage in social-reasoning. Thus, although Joe is able to recall and reproduce basic verbal information, he has a limited ability to use verbal information in more advanced problem solving. This finding

is consistent with Mrs. Doe's report that Joe often fails to follow directions in the classroom. This difficulty may limit his ability to make connections between material presented to him or to decipher complex word problems.

Ultimately, maintaining a child-centered perspective ensures a report that is meaningful to the reader and relevant to the child's natural environments. Moreover, such an approach avoids generic interpretations and addresses many of the concerns raised in the literature regarding the more formulaic test-by-test structure of report writing.

### *Link referral questions, assessment results, and recommendations.*

Appelbaum (1970) asserted that making a report practical and meaningful "requires less of a 'passive' laying out of diagnostic data than an 'active' linking of such data with treatment or other clinical decisions" (p. 354). Numerous recent authors have also stressed the importance of making explicit links between the referral question, results, conclusions, and recommendations (e.g., Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005; Groth-Marnat, 2009; Ownby, 1990; Sattler, 2008; Schwean et al., 2006). Linking the referral question directly to results and conclusions ensures that the reason for seeking assessment services has been addressed and solutions to the initial concern are provided (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005), thereby increasing consumer satisfaction with psychological services (Brenner, 2003). Providing well-reasoned connections between the results and from results to recommendations makes the information meaningful to the reader and creates a stronger message quality. In turn, conclusions will be more credible and persuasive (Andrews & Gutkin, 1994; Ownby, 1990).

Indeed, integrating information is a fundamental component of strong report writing and assessment more broadly (Sattler, 2008; Schwean et al., 2006). Though all psychologists integrate information as a component of interpreting results, ensuring that links are made explicit in psychological reports will support the reader in developing an integrated understanding of the child. Thus, linking information has been included as a core principle of the C.L.E.A.R. Approach because of the importance of this process in producing reports that are meaningful and persuasive for the users of this information. A number of strategies for ensuring that such links are made explicit to readers are provided.

*Making use of the summary section.* The summary is an important section of the report and in some cases, is heavily relied on by readers as the major source of information (Sattler, 2008). As opposed to using the summary to simply reiterate many of the important findings, a summary section can be put to best use by being conceptualized as a place to provide a comprehensive portrait of the child's functioning within the parameters of the assessment. Additionally, the summary often includes the formulation and presentation of diagnostic impressions that serve to prepare and persuade the reader of diagnostic decisions (Schwean et al., 2006). Using a summary in this way requires a focus on explicitly integrating and linking important findings.

Suggestions to ensure that the summary section provides explicit links for the reader to follow include beginning the summary by restating the referral concerns,

grouping information by domain, pointing out consistencies between areas of functioning (e.g., “Susan’s challenges in reading are highly consistent with her fundamental language abilities”) or between assessment observations/results and behavioral reports, and highlighting the impact of some strengths or weaknesses on other areas of functioning (e.g., “George’s inattention in the classroom may be in part a result of his lower processing speed, as he struggles in keeping up with the pace of information being presented”). As well, clearly describing the evidence in support of a diagnosis will make that conclusion more persuasive. Finally, ensuring that the referral question is directly answered within the summary by linking results and conclusions is important. One method proposed by Groth-Marnat (2009) involves numbering the referral questions and conclusions so that they are explicitly linked. In cases where the referral questions and ultimate results of assessment are not obviously connected, (e.g., when a referral for inattention leads to a diagnosis of anxiety), it is critical that the relationship between concerns and conclusions are clearly and explicitly communicated. Such direct explanations are important in persuading the reader that a shift in mindset may be in order.

*Linking within the report.* Although the summary section provides a valuable opportunity to integrate and connect information, links between results and other relevant information should also be provided throughout the report to create an integrated and cumulative document. Such an approach enhances the meaningfulness of specific results and increases the likelihood that the reader will be prepared for, and even expect, the final impressions and diagnostic decisions once they are presented.

Linking the referral question to assessment choices and results may be particularly beneficial, as readers may not be aware of the uses of certain measures or their relevance for different assessment questions. This goal can be achieved by linking a test or construct to its relevance for the referral question (e.g., “To investigate a possible cognitive basis for Matthew’s inattentive behaviours in the classroom, his ability to sustain attention was further examined with the CPT-II”). This statement also acts as a topic signal, providing context and promoting interest in the results to be discussed (Lorch, Lorch, & Inman, 1993). Relevant findings from measures can then be explicitly related back to the referral question. As well, report authors should connect each set of results to previous findings or observations, thereby making the triangulation of findings explicit (e.g., “George’s slow pace of reading is consistent with his processing speed on the WISC-IV and demonstrates the impact of his slower processing on his ability to complete everyday tasks”). As noted above, including “checkpoints” or summaries throughout the report in which related findings are integrated and discrepancies are addressed may be a useful strategy.

*Supporting recommendations.* Recommendations are more persuasive when they are perceived as resulting from assessment findings rather than clinician speculation (Andrews & Gutkin, 1994). The expository process model proposed by Ownby and Wallbrown (1986) provides a specific framework for making such links explicit. Specifically, these authors suggest making “given-new” statements that consist of a logical sequence from basic data to theoretical-construct to conclusion and recommendation.

Thus, effective report writers could present recommendations by first reiterating the conclusions from the assessment followed by an introduction of the intervention strategy (e.g., “Sally demonstrated difficulty across all tasks that required detailed visual processing, which appears to be impacting her word reading and decoding abilities. The following are recommended in supporting Sally’s word-reading development”). As well, justifying recommendations by identifying how they will address the referral question and/or assessment outcomes is advised to ensure that readers place value in the recommendations. This may be particularly important in non-academic areas, as recommendations addressing processing abilities (e.g., memory) have been found to be less often acknowledged and implemented in IPP development (D’Amato & Dean, 1987).

Ultimately, providing links throughout the report that explicitly connect and integrate information allows the reader to become a more involved participant, thereby increasing understanding and investment in the process and ultimate findings. This, in turn, may increase the likelihood that results and recommendations are used in supporting the child, thereby making the entire assessment process more efficient and valuable.

### *Enable the reader with concrete recommendations*

The recommendations section has been identified as the most important component of a psychological report (Brenner, 2003; Harvey, 2006). From a practical standpoint, this recognition is fitting as assessments are typically requested to provide support in helping the child. Several studies to date have found that teachers prefer and are most likely to use recommendations that are concrete and easily implementable (e.g., Salvagno & Teglassi, 1987; Witt, Moe, Gutkin, & Andrews, 1984). Moreover, unclear or seemingly unimportant recommendations may not be used in the development of IEPs or IPPs, resulting in important strategies for the child being ignored. For instance, D’Amato and Dean (1987) found a correlation of only  $r = .3$  between report recommendations and IEP goals and strategies.

As recommendations are a central component of a psychologists’ contribution to a child’s well-being, making the best use of this opportunity by providing understandable and easily implementable recommendations will increase the overall value of the report. Strategies for linking recommendations to assessment findings have been discussed above. However, the practice of providing concrete and understandable recommendations has been included as a distinct principle of the C.L.E.A.R. Approach because of the implications of this practice on making the report meaningful and relevant to its readers. Ultimately, effective recommendations will enable readers to take appropriate actions to support the child.

The S.M.A.R.T. principles for recommendations is a useful framework for ensuring that recommendations are concrete and useable (Montgomery, Dyke, & Schwean, 2008). Specifically, these authors indicate that recommendations should be specific, measurable and meaningful, attainable, realistic, and timely. Recommendations that are based on these concepts are argued to be more easily translated into IPPs (Montgomery et al., 2008). Psychologists are encouraged to probe current practices

and availability of intervention services when interviewing parents and teachers during the assessment process to ensure that recommendations are appropriate to the setting and resources available.

Suggestions for presenting the recommendations with the report include organizing recommendations by domain, prioritizing recommendations within each domain, and providing specific examples of how recommendations can be implemented. As well, appendices with worksheets that can be used directly or serve as samples of a strategy to be put in use can be provided. Finally, allowing teachers and parents the opportunity to review and discuss recommendations prior to finalizing the report may provide an important avenue to ensure that specific concerns have been appropriately addressed (Harvey, 2006). Above all, writers should ensure that recommendations are directly applicable to the client and are not “canned” or given to all clients irrespective of their individual abilities and circumstances.

### *Address strengths as well as weaknesses.*

A strengths-based perspective is about “understanding the client in an integrated way so that strengths can be marshalled to undo troubles” (Rashid & Ostermann, 2009, p. 490). This perspective has been growing in the psychology literature, and an increasing number of authors have written on the nature and process of a strengths-based assessment (e.g., Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005; Jimerson, Sharkey, Nybork, & Furlong, 2004; Rashid & Ostermann, 2009; Rhee, Furlong, Turner, & Harari, 2001). However, much less consideration has been given to implementing such a perspective in report writing. Indeed, although many psychologists claim to be considering strengths, describing strengths is not nearly as consistently achieved as is the description of deficits (Brenner & Holzberg, 2000; Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005).

Groth-Marnat (2009) has argued for several benefits of including strengths in client reports. For instance, he suggests that a deficit-focused perspective presents an unbalanced and distorted view of the client, which can overemphasize the extent of his or her challenges. As well, deficit-focused reports can be demoralizing for clients (or parents and teachers) and alienate them from the assessor and assessment process. Finally, identifying strengths can have substantial therapeutic benefits. Several additional benefits can be noted in relation to psychoeducational reports. First, research on resilience has highlighted the importance of considering strengths in predicting long-term outcomes, as they can play a significant protective role (Rhee et al., 2001). Second, identifying strengths may be valuable in planning child-centered interventions and appropriate support for a child and promoting feelings of success (Jimerson et al., 2004). Given the benefits of considering and describing strengths in psychological reports, this practice has been included as one of the core principles of the C.L.E.A.R. Approach to prompt psychologists to make conscious efforts to describe and integrate strengths within their conceptualization and presentation of the child.

Snyder and colleagues (2006) have advocated for a balanced report that addresses strengths as well as weaknesses. Specifically, these authors encourage the identification of four aspects of a client: the strengths in the client’s psychological makeup, the

weaknesses in the client's psychological makeup, the strengths in the client's environment, and the weaknesses in the client's environment. This approach provides information about how to intervene with the person as a whole to improve functioning and life satisfaction and incorporates both positive and balanced impressions of the client.

Of course, given that referral questions are typically deficit based, maintaining a balanced approach that highlights strengths as well as weaknesses can be a challenge. Snyder et al. (2006) have provided several specific strategies that may be beneficial in promoting clear and overt discussions of strengths. For instance, they suggest that psychologists may wish to include a specific "strengths" section of the report to ensure that these areas are emphasized. As well, the authors highlight the importance of writing in a positive tone and framing the report as a "constructive effort aimed at helping the client improve" (p. 41). Finally, strengths should be integrated into the overall case conceptualization and be actively used to formulate recommendations. Clearly outlining how a given recommendation will make use of a child's personal or environmental strengths will ensure that this is clear to the reader (e.g., "When working with visual math problems, make use of Jenny's verbal strengths by having her verbally describe what she sees and generate a word problem to represent the question").

Efforts to include strengths of the child and his or her environment in psychoeducational reports will produce reports that are more meaningful and persuasive to the reader, as they provide a more balanced and comprehensive picture of the child. This, in turn, may increase the likelihood that conclusions will be accepted and recommendations implemented. Moreover, these efforts may promote a more positive perception of the profession of school psychology from those who make use of it, as it is recognized that psychologists are not only interested in the child's problems.

### **Readability**

Readability of psychological reports is perhaps one of the most discussed topics in literature on report writing (e.g., Brenner, 2003; Goldfinger & Pomerantz, 2010; Groth-Marnat & Horvath, 2006; Harvey 1997, 2006). As has been argued extensively, reports that are written at a reading level above that of most readers are typically perceived as ineffective largely because readers give up trying to interpret the information for themselves. Ultimately, ensuring report readability is critical in promoting understandable, meaningful, relevant, and persuasive reports. As such, this component is critical to the C.L.E.A.R. Approach.

Several issues have been discussed above in relation to readability of reports. Of primary relevance is the target audience. As it has become increasingly evident that reports must be transportable and often have more than one primary audience (Ackerman, 2006; Brenner, 2003), it has been recommended that reports be written at no higher than a Grade 12 reading level (Harvey, 1997). A related issue is the use of psychological jargon in reports. Although some argue that psychological jargon should be entirely avoided (e.g., Rucker, 1967b), others note that simply providing explanations for jargon can be equally effective and in some cases, more helpful to the reader (Brenner, 2003; Donaldson et al., 2004; Wiese, Bush, Newman, Benes, & Witt, 1986).

In fact, report readers have consistently indicated a preference for longer reports that include descriptions of such relevant terms (Donaldson et al., 2004; Weddig, 1984; Wiener, 1985, 1987; Wiener & Kohler, 1986). However, overall length must also be a consideration in ensuring that the material is read. Although there is no set “standard” for report length, it is important to take the target audience and amount of required detail into consideration when composing reports (Groth-Marnat & Horvath, 2006).

Psychologists appear to be largely unaware of the readability challenges of their reports without explicit feedback (Harvey 1997, 2006). Moreover, the consistent finding of reports written at a higher level than most readers suggests that practical and implementable strategies are required to put these ideals into practice. Suggestions to improve the readability of reports include the use of word-processing readability checks (such as the Flesch reading index and grade-level readability scores) when editing reports, reading the report from the perspective of the specific intended reader (e.g., teacher, parent) in an effort to isolate terms that may be not be commonly used, and the creation of a “word bank” of jargon terms and understandable definitions that can be quickly and easily referenced and used in reports when introducing constructs (Donaldson et al., 2004; Harvey, 1997, 2006). In addition, attention to writing style is important in reducing the overall complexity of the report. For example, run-on sentences and double negatives should be avoided, combinations of lengthy words limited, and sentence length varied to make the writing interesting. Of course, clear and simplified writing must be balanced with the need to maintain a professional report. In supporting this balance, it may be beneficial to create a set of sample reports that have been edited specifically to improve readability, which can then be modeled and referenced when writing.

Ultimately, clear and understandable writing underlies the possibility of readers taking meaning from the information provided and is thus an essential principle of report writing. Attention to the readability of writing and attempts to take the perspective of likely readers of the report can ensure that they will be understood as intended and used to their fullest value.

## **Conclusions**

Sattler (2008) has identified report writing as one of the defining features of the profession of school psychology. Moreover, the practice of report writing takes up a sizeable component of their time. Indeed, a recent survey of school psychologists in Canada indicated that writing reports is the second most time intensive professional activity (Jordan, Hinds, & Saklofske, 2009). Producing reports that are understandable, meaningful, relevant, and persuasive for their readers can ensure that this time is well used.

Given the importance of report writing to the profession of school psychology, and the amount of time spent on this activity, it is important that school psychologists are aware of and understand the literature regarding the common difficulties with reports.

Specifically, comprehension of the information in reports by nonprofessional readers is noted in the literature to be an ongoing concern that must be addressed.

The C.L.E.A.R. Approach to report writing addresses the primary concerns identified in the literature regarding psychological reports over the past several decades. Specifically, difficulties with readability, length, generic or limited interpretation of results, poor organization of information, a focus on client weaknesses, and poor links between information in reports have been identified as problematic. The C.L.E.A.R. Approach addresses these difficulties by specifying and outlining five concepts that, if utilized, hold promise to improve the quality and efficacy of school psychological reports.

The C.L.E.A.R. Approach suggests that school psychologists focus on a child-centered perspective to report writing that links referral questions to assessment results and recommendations, enables the reader with concrete recommendations, addresses strengths as well as weaknesses, and takes readability into account. In following these suggestions, school psychologists can effectively address the primary concerns with psychological reports, thereby making them better understood by important stakeholders in the assessment process, such as teachers, parents, and the clients themselves. In turn, reports can be more effective in supporting both an informed understanding of the client's specific skills and abilities and intervention strategies to promote positive change.

It is hoped that school psychologists become better acquainted with the prominent concerns in report writing and take steps to ensure that their reports are written in such a way as to promote efficacy in their work and positive change in their clients. Indeed, as the purpose of assessment is to better understand the skills and abilities of an individual, and reports are the dominant method of dissemination of assessment results, effective report writing skills are key to a best-practice approach. By following the C.L.E.A.R. Approach to report writing, school psychologists can improve their report writing skills so that the knowledge gained through psychological assessment can be better understood by others, in turn resulting in improved professional service to clients, their families, teachers, and others.

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## Bios

**Sarah Mastoras** is a doctoral candidate in the School and Applied Child Psychology program at the University of Calgary. Her dissertation is in the area of resilience and social support in children with ADHD.

**Emma Climie** is a doctoral candidate in the School and Applied Child Psychology Program at the University of Calgary. Her research interests lie in the strengths-based understanding of ADHD.

**Adam McCrimmon** is a registered psychologist and an assistant professor in the School Psychology Program at the University of Calgary. His research interests involve cognition and cognitive development, neuropsychological functioning, and social skills in autism spectrum disorders, with a specific interest in executive functioning. As well, he is interested in interventions to promote development in these areas.

**Vicki L. Schwean** is a professor and vice-dean in the Faculty of Education, University of Calgary. Her research interests focus on developmental psychopathology and resiliency, as well as child assessment.