

PROMPT ENGINEERING
PORTFOLIO

Readability Rubric

Creative Writing Assessment Engine

FIN Framework · 28 Writer Techniques · Conventions Scoring

7+ iterations · Grades 7 & 8 · Alice LaPlante-inspired feedback voice

Readability Rubric Assessment Prompt

A three-criteria creative writing evaluator built for 7th and 8th grade student fiction — combining the FIN readability framework, a 28-technique writer's craft catalog, and a conventions scoring system into a single, consistently formatted assessment.

MODEL	INTERFACE	AUDIENCE	ITERATIONS
Claude 3.5+	Chat / API	Grades 7 & 8	7+

Problem Statement

Assessing middle school creative writing is a distinct challenge: the evaluative criteria for published fiction are far too demanding for novice writers, while rubrics designed purely for accuracy (spelling, grammar) miss the qualities that make creative writing worth reading in the first place. What was needed was a framework calibrated specifically to 7th and 8th grade cognitive and creative development.

The prompt needed to do three things simultaneously: assess overall readability through a holistic lens (FIN), provide craft instruction that was specific to the actual text in front of the student — not boilerplate advice — and evaluate mechanical conventions using the same percentage-based scale used in other assessment contexts for consistency.

Perhaps most critically, the feedback voice had to be encouraging and generative rather than corrective. Middle school writers are at a formative stage. A harsh or clinical assessment can shut down a writer's willingness to take creative risks. The Alice LaPlante model — rigorous but deeply invested in the writer's growth — provided the right tonal anchor.

Prompt Design

The following is a representative excerpt from the opening of the prompt, which establishes the evaluator's role, audience assumptions, and feedback philosophy before any rubric criteria are introduced.

You will be creating a program for reliably assessing creative writing. You will take on the role of an encouraging, expert writing instructor similar in tone, guidance, and feedback of Alice LaPlante and of her story: *The Making of a Story: A Norton Guide to Creative Writing*.

You will be assessing the writings from both 7th and 8th grade students for overall creativity, clarity, and coherence. The following is important. You must assume that the student writers are at a novice level. They are not advanced writers. The writings will neither be high school, college, nor professional level writings. You must not presume as much. Rather, the writings will reflect a typical middle school student's mindset, maturity, sense of humor, and cognitive level.

Knowing all of this, you must assess the writing accordingly.

The Three-Criteria Structure

The Readability Rubric organizes every assessment into three clearly titled sections, always in the same order. The format is locked — it cannot vary from assessment to assessment regardless of text length, quality, or genre.

Criterion 1: READABILITY (FIN Assessment)

FIN stands for Fluency, Identity, and Novelty — the three qualities that make a story readable to its audience. The evaluator reads the entire story, determines which of the five rating levels best fits, and then provides specific textual evidence for that determination across seven sub-dimensions: Introduction, Creativity, Originality, Problem/Conflict, Organization & Pacing, Climax, and Closing & Resolution.

The evaluation also includes extended specific commentary on character depth, dialogue dynamics, dialogue formatting, imagery, logical coherence, and pacing — each grounded in quoted evidence from the actual text.

Rating	What It Means
Highly Proficient	FIN is strong with this one. Grabber intro, abundant creativity, original plot, complex conflict, exceptional organization, clear climax, logical resolution.
Proficient	FIN is strong in at least two parts. Catchy beginning attempted, adequate creativity, fairly clear voice and conflict, adequate pacing and climax.
Approaching Proficiency	FIN present in perhaps one part. Weak grabber, some creativity that may distract, unclear voice, simple conflict, weak organization or pacing.
Novice	FIN is overall weak. No grabber, heavy lack of creativity, missing or unclear conflict, disorganized, missing or unclear climax or resolution.
Insufficient Data	No commitment to story. Lifeless writing. No FIN.

Design note: The five-level scale was calibrated to middle school development. 'Highly Proficient' describes genuinely impressive student work — not published-author work. This distinction was introduced in iteration 3 after early versions applied criteria more appropriate to adult fiction.

Criterion 2: THINGS TO CONSIDER AS A WRITER (28 Techniques)

The second criterion draws from a catalog of 28 named writer techniques drawn from Alice LaPlante's Making of a Story framework. Crucially, the prompt does not instruct the evaluator to mention all 28 techniques — it instructs it to identify only the techniques most directly relevant to the specific story being evaluated, with specific examples drawn from that story's actual text.

This conditional specificity was the hardest design problem across all seven iterations. Early versions produced generic technique lists that could have been applied to any story. The current version requires that every piece of craft advice reference an actual line or passage from the submitted writing.

#	Technique	What the Writer Does
1	Close-Echo Effect	Intentional near-repetition of words/phrases for rhythm and emphasis
2	Repeating Details	Specific details recur at different points, threading continuity through the story
3	Repeating Sentence Structure	Structural repetition (not words) creates rhythmic sound patterns
4	Re-Say	Immediate restatement of an idea in different words for emphasis
5	Striking Adjectives	Unexpected adjective choices that make the reader pause
6	Out-of-Place Adjectives	Adjective placed after noun or in unexpected position for attention
7	Striking Verbs	Unexpected verb pairings, often subtly personifying a subject
8	Striking Adverbs	Adverbs used in unexpected combinations or positions
9	Intentional Vagueness	Deliberate use of nonspecific pronouns/adjectives for effect
10	Proper Nouns	Name-dropping for specificity and narrative authority
11	Make-Your-Own-Words	Invented, often hyphenated words when no existing word fits
12	Artful Use of 'And'	Sentence-starting 'and' gives a beat its own weight while remaining connected
13	Runaway Sentences	Long, winding sentences that convey franticness, excitement, or desperation
14	Artful Sentence Fragments	Grammatically incomplete sentences crafted for deliberate rhetorical effect
15	One-Sentence Paragraphs	Single sentences surrounded by white space for maximum emphasis
16	Direct-Contact Sentence	Writer breaks narrative to speak directly to the reader
17	Seesaw Sentences	Two-part sentences with a back-and-forth rhythmic relationship
18	Taffy Sentences	Central idea stretched further and further with each added clause
19	Short, Short, Long Sentences	Three-sentence rhythm: duh, duh, duh-duh-duh
20	Sentences That Make a Long Story Short	One sentence covers a large span of time or action quickly
21	Whispering Parentheses	Parenthetical asides that step outside the narrative to speak to the reader
22	Commentary Dashes	Em-dashes set off 'by-the-way' layers of detail or commentary
23	Items in a Series	Listed items whose arrangement creates meaning through juxtaposition
24	Super Colons	Colons that mark what follows as significant or set off thought/speech
25	Super Ellipses	Ellipses that move time, place, or signal the inexpressible
26	Quotation Mark-Less Quotations	Speech represented without quotation marks for deliberate effect
27	Interesting Italics	Italics that add a layer of meaning beyond standard emphasis
28	Text Shaped to Match Meanings	Layout or typography that enacts the meaning of the text

Design note: The techniques are presented to students as things they are already doing (or close to doing), not as deficiencies. The feedback reframes each technique as an instinct the student already has — and invites them to use it more deliberately. This reframing was introduced in iteration 5.

| Criterion 3: CONVENTIONS (Mechanical Correctness)

The third criterion evaluates the mechanical correctness of the text across five elements: spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar/usage, and paragraphing. The guiding question is: 'How much work would a copy editor need to do to prepare this piece for publication?' This framing keeps all five elements in play simultaneously rather than allowing any one to dominate.

Score	Mastery Level	Writer Is	Defining Characteristic
100%	Mastery: Above & Beyond	Exceptional	Error-free, creative conventions. Enhances readability. Virtually no editing needed.
90%	Mastery: Highly Proficient	Experienced	Consistent correct conventions. Very limited editing needed.
80%	Mastery: Proficient	Capable	Grade-appropriate conventions with some minor errors. Minor editing.
70%	Approaching Proficiency	Developing	Inconsistent conventions that may impair readability. Noticeable errors.
60%	Novice	Emerging	Many errors making text difficult to read. Requires much editing.
50%	Insufficient Data	Beginning	Numerous errors making text unreadable. Requires extensive editing.

Design note: The conventions assessment explicitly instructs the evaluator not to correct errors in the text — only to assess them. Students receive a description of what they did and did not do, not a corrected draft. This preserves ownership of the writing while giving clear developmental feedback.

Sample Output — The Harp

The following excerpts are drawn from the assessment of a 7th/8th grade story titled The Harp — a mythologically-grounded crime-drama about a morally compromised narrator searching for his estranged sister.

READABILITY — Score: Highly Proficient

"The Novelty is where this story truly shines: blending a gritty, modern crime-drama atmosphere with Greek mythology is an unexpected and bold creative choice, and it works. The story earns its reader's attention early and holds it almost all the way through. This is the kind of story that makes a reader want to know what happens next — and that is no small achievement."

Character Depth

"Dan is not a hero — he is self-interested, dismissive of his sister, and motivated almost entirely by greed at the story's outset. Yet the story gives him just enough vulnerability — the flashback to the ten-year-old boy watching his sister dragged away by police — to make him sympathetic without excusing him. This is the single most powerful passage in the story, and it retroactively explains everything about Dan's emotional armor. It shows, rather than tells, why Dan is the way he is."

THINGS TO CONSIDER AS A WRITER

"STRIKING ADJECTIVES — You have the instinct; now push it further. Your best adjective choice in the entire story is in this line: 'it reeked of something ancient and wrong.' The word 'wrong' is extraordinary here — it is not the adjective anyone would expect, and it is exactly right because of that."

CONVENTIONS — Score: 80% (Mastery: Proficient)

"The intentional use of one-sentence paragraphs — 'But today was different,' 'Static,' 'Harps' — demonstrates an intuitive understanding of white space as a tool. There are a small number of places where a paragraph break would help clarify the shift between narration and action, but overall, paragraphing is handled with care and intention."

Design Decisions

1. Alice LaPlante as the Feedback Voice Anchor

Specifying LaPlante's *The Making of a Story* as the tonal model was a deliberate choice introduced in iteration 1 and retained through all seven. LaPlante's approach is rigorous but deeply human — she treats student writers as writers, not as students performing writing. This distinction shapes every line of the feedback. The evaluator praises instincts before suggesting improvements, and framing advice around what the student is already doing rather than what they are failing to do.

2. Explicit Audience Calibration

The prompt explicitly states that the writing reflects a typical middle school student's mindset, maturity, sense of humor, and cognitive level — and that the evaluator must not presume otherwise. This instruction was added in iteration 3 after early versions applied criteria appropriate to college-level fiction, producing feedback that was technically accurate but developmentally inappropriate and discouraging.

3. Conditional, Text-Specific Technique Feedback

The most important design constraint in Criterion 2 is that technique advice must be specific to the actual story and must reference actual passages. Generic advice — 'try using sentence fragments for emphasis' — was produced by early iterations and was the primary reason for iterations 4 and 5. The final version requires the evaluator to identify techniques the student is already using instinctively and to show the student how to use them more deliberately.

4. The Four Pieces of Advice Requirement

The prompt requires exactly four named, numbered pieces of improvement advice — not three, not five. This constraint produces specificity. When asked for open-ended improvement advice, the evaluator tends toward vagueness. Four numbered items require prioritization: the evaluator must determine the four most important things this specific writer needs to hear, not a general list of craft improvements.

5. The 'Do Not Correct Errors' Directive

The prompt explicitly instructs the evaluator not to correct spelling, punctuation, or formatting errors in the text — only to assess them in the Conventions section. This preserves student authorship and avoids the trap of providing a corrected draft that the student might simply copy. The student receives diagnostic information about their conventions patterns, not a solution that removes the learning opportunity.

6. Locked Format Directive

The final instruction in the prompt states explicitly that the feedback format cannot ever change from assessment to assessment. This was essential for using the rubric at scale across a full class set. Every student receives the same three sections in the same order with the same headings — making comparative review, grade defense, and progress tracking straightforward across multiple submissions.

Iteration Notes

This prompt went through at least seven documented iterations. Key developments:

- Iteration 1: Established the LaPlante feedback voice and basic three-criteria structure. Criteria were loosely defined with no specific scoring levels.
- Iteration 2: Added the five-level FIN scale with specific descriptors for each level. Added the 28-technique catalog for Criterion 2.
- Iteration 3: Added the explicit audience calibration language ('novice level... typical middle school student's mindset'). Early versions without this produced feedback calibrated to adult fiction.
- Iteration 4: Required that Criterion 2 technique feedback reference actual passages from the submitted text. Generic technique advice was the primary failure mode of iterations 1–3.
- Iteration 5: Reframed technique feedback to identify what students are already doing rather than what they should add. Changed feedback from prescriptive to developmental.
- Iteration 6: Added the specific commentary requirements for character depth, dialogue dynamics, dialogue formatting, imagery, logical coherence, and pacing — each requiring textual evidence.
- Iteration 7: Locked the output format explicitly. Added the four-pieces-of-advice requirement to force prioritization in improvement feedback.

The most persistent design challenge was preventing generic feedback. In creative writing assessment, the temptation to produce advice that sounds helpful but applies to any story is strong. Every major iteration addressed a different manifestation of this problem, ultimately resolving it through the combination of the textual evidence requirement and the student-instinct reframing.

Results & Application

3 Distinct scoring criteria per assessment	28 Named writer techniques available for feedback
Locked Output format — consistent across all assessments	4 Specific, prioritized improvement pieces per assessment

The prompt is deployed across a 7th/8th grade creative writing curriculum. It handles a wide range of story types — fantasy, realistic fiction, mythology-adjacent narratives, humor pieces, horror — and produces assessments calibrated to each. Because the technique feedback is story-specific, no two assessments read alike even though all follow the identical format.

The locked format makes student self-comparison across multiple submissions straightforward: every assessment produces the same structure, so students can track their own development in FIN, specific craft techniques, and conventions across a semester's worth of writing.