Tool 3: Designing an English Writing Test

The ability to write in English is essential for most technical and professional jobs. The ITA Skills Passport (Tool 4) also assesses written English, but as it is aimed at the craft and trades level it may not be appropriate to your situation. Although it is not necessary to have good grammar, a wide vocabulary, correct spelling or knowledge of all Canadian idioms, it will almost certainly be important to convey meaning clearly and unambiguously in writing (for example in emails, memos or technical reports). New employees can pick up and develop the other aspects over time.

For jobs that are not customer-facing, fluent spoken English is often not so critical, although the ability to understand and communicate is still essential. The interview (Tool 7) and practical test (Tool 6) can adequately assess the ability to speak and understand English, and a separate test is generally not required. In any case, standard English tests, such as TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC or TOWES, already exist and there is no need for you to develop another one.

Before conducting an assessment, identify the conditions under which language skills are most critical. The requirements for the job will determine what level of English language skills you will need in a suitable employee.

Some jobs do not require a high level of language proficiency, while others need specific job-related language abilities. Focus on the core English language skills needed to work safely and do the job effectively. Take account of regional differences, differences in technical terms and cultural differences in expression.

Typically, writing tests focus on the comprehension of written text and writing ability, and ask the candidate to draft a document that would be a part of their everyday work—preparing a report, analyzing a report to provide recommendations, interpreting and writing about data (presented in the form of a chart, graph or diagram), writing a business email, or making a presentation. Select a suitable task and assess the candidate's ability to analyze a topic, organize and develop thoughts and ideas, and how well he or she can express these in a coherent, clear and useful way.

Guidelines for Designing and Developing an English Language Test for Internationally-Trained Professionals:

1) **Clarify expectations:** Candidates will come from different cultural and educational backgrounds. Do not assume that they have experience with English language assessments. Provide them with clear expectations in terms of what type of response is acceptable and provide them with examples and non-examples as required. Make candidates aware of the criteria you will be using. If possible, provide candidates with the evaluation criteria before the test.

2) **Provide clear directions:** Your directions for the test need to minimize confusion and maximize clarity. Use simple language and short sentences for instructions. However, do not simplify industry terminology if it is being included as a part of the test. If a context or scenario is required for assessment, use a context that is universally applicable. Avoid using colloquial language or Canadian phrases that may not be understood by the candidates. Avoid using B.C.-specific jargon and slang.

3) **Be sensitive and objective**: Ensure the content of the test does not include sensitive or controversial content that may be perceived as offensive or upsetting for the candidates. Internationally-trained workers have a diverse range of experience but may be unfamiliar with the cultural context in B.C. Design the test so that it provides a neutral context and will be perceived as fair and objective by all candidates.

4) **Be pragmatic:** Remember that most languages have a very different grammatical structure than English. For example: no definite and indefinite articles (no 'a' or 'the'), only a simple present tense, past tense and future tense (no 'I am coming', 'I will have done it', 'would you do it') and no use of please and thank you. Fluency in English is not necessarily a sign of intelligence, and a lack of fluency is not necessarily a sign of stupidity. Remember that it is the ability to communicate that you are testing, not style or grammar.

Use assessment items that provide dependable and consistent information. Use assessment procedures and methods that have been validated for the purpose for which they are being used.

SATISFACTORY - "Demonstrates acceptable proficiency"
This level describes a candidate who conveys the information that is required, in a clear and unambiguous form, providing relevant, complete and detailed information that is technically accurate. If the candidate will only be expected to create internal documents that are not widely read, then grammar need not be important.

NEED TO DEVELOP - "Does not yet demonstrate fully acceptable proficiency but has potential"
This level describes a candidate who provides relevant information with some ambiguities but the information is technically accurate. This candidate does not meet the minimum requirements but shows potential to improve given the opportunity for on-the-job training, guidance or coaching by a colleague or supervisor. It describes a level that may impede industry-

specific job functions in some areas if opportunities for improvement are not provided during the induction period.

UNLIKELY TO DEVELOP - "Is not currently able to communicate clearly in at least one significant aspect"

This level describes a candidate who provides irrelevant, incomplete or incoherent information that is technically inaccurate. This candidate does not meet the minimum requirements for writing required for the job function.