# PUPILS' WRITTEN LANGUAGE IN THE LATVIAN LANGUAGE AND HISTORY STATE EXAMINATIONS IN LATGALE IN 2021

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**Abstract.** *The research aims to examine pupils' text creation skills in the Latvian language and history state examinations (CE). The source of the research is the examination papers of pupils in Latgale in 2021: Latvian language CE (a substantiated opinion; 250 words) and history CE (task 3 of part 3 – an essay; 200 words). Evaluation criteria of both examinations show that the quality of spelling is considered more important in the Latvian language examination (10 points out of 34 (approx. 30%) can be obtained for orthography and punctuation).*

*The article summarises the main types and number of errors in morphology and syntax in both exams. In morphology, several types of errors are distinguished: unmotivated use or absence of long characters, misspelling of consonants, errors in the spelling and hyphenation of words, misspelling of proper names, misspelling of verbs and foreign words. The number of errors in pupils' work was also determined for several syntactic constructions: coordinated parts of sentence, coordinated parts of sentence with a generalising word, participial clauses, insertions, and explanatory word groups. The number of punctuation errors in sentences, separating the parts of a compound sentence and a complex sentence, and unmotivated uses of punctuation were also investigated.*

*Comparing the quality of students' written language in Latvian and history, it can be concluded that the quality of writing in both exams remains similar for the same student. There are pupils with no orthographic and punctuation errors in both examinations. Some students have some spelling and punctuation errors in both examinations. Some pupils have many spelling and punctuation errors in both examinations. This result is an indication that students follow spelling and punctuation norms according to their knowledge, skills, and writing culture. The study does not support the hypothesis that in the writing part of exams in subjects other than the Latvian language, pupils' knowledge is weaker and a more negligent attitude towards writing culture would be observed.*

*Keywords: examinations, Latvian language, orthography, syntax, text.*

## Introduction

At the end of Grade 12, pupils must pass a Latvian language exam, including text-formation, i.e. they must be able to compose a text "in accordance with the author's communicative purpose and the requirements of the functional style and speech genre" (VPSV, 2007, 393), using cultural or literary facts as the basis. The centralised Latvian language examination papers have been analysed several times (VISC, 2007; VISC, 2012; VISC, 2015; VISC, 2020), focusing not only on the text analysis and basic language skills part but also on the quality of the substantiated opinion. The ability to form "a wide variety of sentences and structural and modal constructions" (Kvašīte, 2013, 190) in written language is linked to the ability to follow orthographic and punctuation norms. In our society, it is a well-established opinion that pupils abide by orthography and punctuation norms in the Latvian language exam papers, but they observe orthography and punctuation norms less in exam papers of other subjects – history, geography, or economics. The authors of the study will try to test this hypothesis. The study "Pupils Written Language in the Latvian Language and History State Examinations in Latgale in 2021" is part of a larger study on the quality of pupils' written language in the Latvian language and history examinations in Latvia. It is carried out to discover whether pupils pay more attention to spelling and punctuation when writing a centralised Latvian language exam paper than a history exam paper.

The study aims to investigate Latvian language proficiency in text production in the centralised Latvian language and history examinations. An empirical research method was used in the work. The relevance of the study stems from the outcomes of the Secondary Education Standard: the pupil is able to choose the most appropriate and accurate orthographic, grammatical, and punctuation devices to produce an influential text, as well as to follow the spelling norms of literary language in all subjects (Standarts, 2020). If pupils have mastered the requirements set out in the Standard, the text production in the centralised examination in Latvian language and history should be of good quality.

**Literature review**

The research uses the opinions of language didactics theory on language competence (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Daszkiewicz, Wenzel & Kusiak-Pisowacka, 2019, Martena, Laiveniece & Šalme, 2022), studies on Latvian pupils' linguistic competence (Gavriļina & Špūle, 2018; Anspoka & Martena, 2021), and research results in other regions of Latvia (Straupeniece & Dzintars, 2023a, Straupeniece & Dzintars, 2023b).

The substantiated opinion is a part of the primary and secondary school Latvian language exams. Researchers have also previously focused on pupils' reflective texts. Margarita Gavriļina and Kaspars Špūle's study "Latvijas skolēnu valodas (gramatiskās) kompetences analīze" (*Analysis of Latvian pupils' language (grammatical) competence*) (2018) analyses the state examination papers of 6th and 9th grade pupils (2013–2016), i.e. the diagnostic test in the 6th grade and the examination paper in the 9th grade in Latvian and Russian, focusing on pupils' ability to perform different types of language competence tasks and their ability to argue. Both 6th-grade essays (150 words) and 9th-grade exam substantiated opinions (250–300 words) have been studied. Although the 6th-grade papers were assessed only on the orthographic and punctuation norms learnt, as both researchers point out, the most frequent scores for students in orthography and punctuation were 0 (6 orthographic errors – 0 points, 8 punctuation errors – 0 points). On average, ninth-graders scored 40% in orthography and 25% in punctuation (Gavriļina & Špūle, 2018, 5). The authors conclude that Russian-speaking pupils have fewer punctuation errors than Latvian pupils and stress that a Russian-speaking pupil learns punctuation twice in both Russian and Latvian lessons. When leaving primary school, pupils should be able to write words orthographically correctly and use punctuation according to the punctuation rules (Martena, Laiveniece & Šalme, 2022, 84), but the results do not confirm that.

Zenta Anspoka's and Sanita Martena's methodological aid, "Latviešu valodas lietpratība un tās pilnveides iespējas vidusskolā" (Latvian Language Literacy and Its Improvement Opportunities in Secondary School, 2021) analyses 409 examination papers from different regions of Latvia (Kurzeme, Latgale, Riga) and school education programmes. According to the researchers, the division by educational programme (secondary schools with Latvian as the official language, minority secondary schools, and state grammar schools) does not reveal the real situation, as secondary schools and state grammar schools with Latvian as the official language also enrol pupils for whom Latvian is not their mother tongue. The study describes not only the spelling of words and word forms and punctuation norms but also the pupils' ability to compose a text according to the topic, their ability to use arguments and facts, their vocabulary and the language style of the text. The authors identify eight common punctuation errors: incorrect use of punctuation, separating parts of compound sentences and complex sentences, participial clauses, coordinated parts of sentence, similes, insertions, explanatory word groups, and end-of-sentence punctuation (Anspoka & Martena, 2021, 38). It is also concluded here that there are fewer punctuation errors (by 9%) in the work of minority secondary school pupils compared to Latvian schools and grammar schools because foreigners

use simple syntactic language devices (Anspoka & Martena, 2021, 44). Everyone has the opportunity to choose the syntactic language tools that help to avoid punctuation errors.

In 2023, the study of pupils' exam papers continues, and the 2021 Latvian language and history exam papers of pupils in Kurzeme and Riga have been studied. The researchers, Daiga Straupeniece and Normunds Dzintars point out similar types of errors in orthography and punctuation, which Anspoka and Martena have already highlighted. The studies do not observe a large difference in the number of errors in one pupil's essays in both examinations nor do they observe pupils' caution in using "more complex syntactic constructions" (Straupeniece & Dzintars, 2023a, 70) in the exam papers.

The study is being continued to obtain data on the proportions of spelling and punctuation errors among pupils in all regions of Latvia.

## Methodology

The article analyses 15 randomly selected works of pupils in Latgale in the 2021 exam session. For the comparison to be correct, the quality of the written language was examined in both examination papers of one pupil – the Latvian language and history. The study is based on 30 papers (15 text-creation papers in Latvian and 15 in history). CE in Latvian is mandatory, and CE in history is optional; therefore, only the works of pupils who took the history exam were selected. It is impossible to obtain accurate data about the schools and the pupils whose papers were randomly selected, as all exam papers are coded.

The source of the research is the 2021 CE in Latvian (substantiated opinion; 250 words) and the CE in history (Part 3, Task 3 – an essay; 200 words). At first, the evaluation criteria of Latvian language and history CE papers were compared in order to find out what is common and what is different in evaluating the pupils' performance. After the examination of the evaluation criteria for part 3 of the Latvian language CE (Latviešu valoda, 2021), it can be concluded that pupils can receive a total of 34 points: for content (10 points), composition (7 points), language use (3 points), style (3 points), spelling and punctuation errors (10 points). The errors are added together in the evaluation criterion of spelling and punctuation errors (see Table 1).

*Table 1 **A fragment of evaluation criteria in the Latvian language CE***

| Points | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Errors in punct., spelling | 19 or more errors | 17–18 | 15–16 | 13–14 | 11–12 | 9–10 | 7–8 | 5–6 | 3–4 | 2 | 1 |

The examination of the history exam evaluation criteria shows that pupils can receive a total of 12 points: for content (3 points), theory (3 points), facts (3 points), and concepts (3 points). Spelling and punctuation errors are not regarded separately, they are included in the content section (Vēsture, 2021). The criteria for spelling in the history examination are presented in a descriptive form (see Table 3): spelling rules are followed (3 points), spelling rules are followed, but there are some errors caused by inattentiveness (2 points), many spelling errors (1 point), spelling errors do not allow understanding the content (0 points).

*Table 2 A fragment of evaluation criteria in the history CE*

| Points | Content |
|---|---|
| | structure, logical sequence, content's adequacy to the topic |
| 3 | The content is adequate for the selected topic. The content is structured: the text has an introduction, discussion and conclusions. The conclusions are derived from the text. Spelling rules are followed. |
| 2 | The content is adequate for the selected topic. The content is presented sequentially, but some parts are carelessly developed: the introductory part is imprecise, the conclusions are superficial and non-specific. Spelling rules are followed, but there are some careless mistakes. |
| 1 | The content is adequate for an aspect of the chosen topic. The content is presented chaotically, the opinion is not justified – the text retells historical facts. Many spelling mistakes, but the meaning of the text is understandable. The text is too general and vague. |
| 0 | The content matches the topic. Spelling errors make it difficult to understand the content. The principles of tolerance have been violated. |

The description of the criteria shows that in history, spelling errors have not been divided into error types, as is the case in the Latvian language examination, where points are awarded based on the number of spelling and punctuation errors. It can be concluded that, in the Latvian language examination, more attention is paid to the quality of spelling, while in the history exam, the quality of spelling is expressed in terms of "some mistakes", "many mistakes"

The study analysed pupils' performance in the centralised Latvian language and history examination in grade 12, assessing orthographic and punctuation errors and their numbers. The main types of errors in both exams were summarised and compared. In orthography, the focus was on six types of errors: unmotivated use or absence of long characters, errors in the spelling of proper names, errors in spelling words separately or together, errors in the spelling of consonants, errors in the suffix or ending of verbs, errors in the spelling of foreign words. In punctuation, attention was also paid to the main types of errors: errors in separating coordinated parts of a sentence and coordinated parts of a sentence with a generalising word, errors in separating a subordinate clause, participial clause, an insertion, parts of a compound sentence, and in unmotivated use of punctuation.

**Results and Discussion**

A written text is a logically structured, conceptually connected set of statements (VPSV 2007), therefore writing is one of the most difficult linguistic activities to learn, as it combines several aspects – content, text type, style, spelling (Martena, Laiveniece, Šalme 2022). Writing a text is an individual process, but the ability to choose and use diverse language means, morphological, lexical and syntactic, according to the norms of oral and written language, is one of the signs of language competence (Daszkiewicz, Wenzel, & Kusiak-Pisowacka, 2019). Linguistic competence involves knowledge of the language system, including lexicon, phonology, morphology, and syntax, and the ability to use them qualitatively. An individual's attitude towards language is revealed not only by his social status, level of education, character traits, and attitude towards other people but also by the ability to express and defend their opinion and the ability to influence the opinion of others. Although it cannot be directly observed, it can be inferred from an individual's speech behaviour, speech etiquette, and level of linguistic upbringing (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Daszkiewicz, Wenzel, & Kusiak-Pisowacka, 2019).

In the process of researching language competence, it is important to pay attention to the ability to produce a text following the norms of orthography and punctuation. The ability to observe orthography and punctuation norms in the text is closely related to pupils' knowledge,

skills and language culture. It can be used to judge the ability of young people to analyse, describe, reason, and express their thoughts, opinions, and attitudes towards cultural, literary or historical facts while writing essays in the Latvian language and history examinations. A total of 437 errors (orthography – 62%, punctuation – 38%) were found in both exam papers of 15 students in Latgale.

A very high number of errors was found in orthography: 269 orthographic errors (see Table 3) – 114 errors or 42% in the Latvian language exam, 155 errors or 58% in the history exam. Thus, the majority of errors are in the history exam.

*Table 3* **Number of orthographic errors in Latvian and history examinations**

| Error types | Pupils/ subject | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | Latvian | | | | | | | | | | 1 | | 20 | 2 | 17 | 50 | **90** |
| | History | 1 | 1 | | | | 2 | | 1 | | 1 | | 41 | 24 | 14 | 35 | **120** |
| B | Latvian | 1 | | 1 | | | | | | | | | | 1 | | | **3** |
| | History | 1 | | | | | | | | | 3 | | 3 | | 2 | 6 | **15** |
| C | Latvian | | | | | | | | 1 | | | 1 | | | | | **2** |
| | History | | | | | | | | 2 | 1 | | | | | 1 | | **4** |
| D | Latvian | | | 1 | 1 | | | | 2 | | | | 3 | | | 4 | **11** |
| | History | | | | | | | | 2 | 1 | 2 | | 2 | 1 | | 2 | **10** |
| E | Latvian | 1 | | 1 | 1 | | | | 1 | | | | 2 | | | | **6** |
| | History | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 2 | **2** |
| F | Latvian | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | History | | | | | | | | | | | | 2 | 2 | | | **4** |
| **Total** | **Latvian** | **2** | | **3** | **2** | | | | **3** | | **1** | **1** | **28** | **3** | **17** | **54** | **114** |
| **Total** | **History** | **2** | **1** | | | | **2** | | **5** | **2** | **6** | | **48** | **27** | **17** | **45** | **155** |

*A – unmotivated use or absence of long characters*
*B – errors in spelling proper names*
*C – errors in spelling words separately or together*
*D – errors in spelling consonants*
*E – errors in spelling suffixes and endings of verbs*
*F – errors in spelling foreign words*

In Latgale, only two pupils (No. 5 and 7), i.e. 13% did not have a single orthographic error, while in a similar study in Kurzeme, it was 5 pupils (Straupeniece & Dzintars, 2023a, 64), in Riga, 4 pupils (Straupeniece & Dzintars, 2023b, 636). Five pupils (No. 2, 4, 6, 9, 11), i.e. 33%, had 1–2 errors. Several pupils' papers did not contain specific error types, e.g. 6 pupils did not have error type A, 5 students – error type B, 11 students – error type C, 7 students – error type D, 9 students – error type E, 13 students – error type F. In both exams, 5 pupils (No. 10, 12, 13, 14, 15) made type A errors, 1 pupil (No. 1) made type B errors, 1 pupil (No. 8) made type C errors, 3 pupils (No. 8, 12, 15) made type D errors. In both examinations, error types E and F were not present in the work of any pupil.

Although most pupils' work contains one or two errors of the same type, the study found that some pupils have a very high number of spelling errors. Orthographic errors are most common in the essays of pupils whose mother tongue is Russian, as shown by the number of Type A errors – unmotivated use or absence of long characters. The highest number of errors in spelling words was found in 4 pupils' works: No. 15 (99 errors: 54 in Latvian, 45 in history), No. 12 (76 errors: 28 in Latvian, 48 in history), No. 14 (34 errors: 17 in Latvian, 17 in history), and No. 13 (30 errors: 3 in Latvian, 27 in history). These pupils have many errors in both the Latvian language substantiated opinion and the history essay.

The prevalence of orthographic errors in the history exam cannot be assessed unequivocally. Examination of the ratio of errors in both exams shows that only one pupil's (pupil No. 13) work differs significantly in the unmotivated use or absence of long characters (type A errors) in both exams: 2 errors in the Latvian language exam, 24 errors in the history exam. This case may indicate a pre-prepared substantiated opinion paper.

A comparison of the data from Kurzeme, Riga and Latgale (see Table 4) reveals that the Latgale region has more orthographic errors in pupils' works in both the Latvian language and history examinations. The high number of errors in Latgale is due to the work of some pupils whose Latvian language skills are very low.

*Table 4* **Number of orthographic errors in Latvian and history examinations in different regions**

| Subject / regions | Latgale | Kurzeme | Riga |
|---|---|---|---|
| Latvian language CE | 114 | 41 | 25 |
| History CE | 155 | 18 | 36 |
| **Total** | **269** | **59** | **61** |

These results mean that different support materials are needed to help pupils with a native language other than Latvian, to differentiate between short and long vowel spellings, and to promote the development of these skills.

There are fewer punctuation errors in pupils' examination papers. In total, 168 punctuation errors were found in both exams (see Table 4): 99 errors or 59% in the Latvian language exam, 69 errors or 41% in the history exam. The highest number of errors was made in the Latvian language exam.

*Table 5* **Number of punctuation errors in Latvian and history examinations**

| Error types | Pupils/ subject | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| G | Latvian | 1 | | 2 | | | | | 1 | | | | 2 | 1 | 2 | | **9** |
| | History | | | | | | | | | | | | 2 | | | 1 | **3** |
| H | Latvian | | | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | | | | | | **2** |
| | History | | | | | | | | 1 | | | | | 1 | | | **2** |
| I | Latvian | | | 2 | 4 | | | 3 | 3 | 3 | | | 4 | 2 | 10 | 4 | **35** |
| | History | | | | 1 | | | | 2 | 1 | | | 5 | | 4 | 2 | **15** |
| J | Latvian | | 2 | 6 | 2 | | | | 2 | | | 1 | | 1 | 2 | | **16** |
| | History | | | 1 | 2 | | | | 1 | | | 2 | | | 1 | | **7** |
| K | Latvian | | | | 1 | | | | | | | | | | 2 | | **3** |
| | History | | | | 1 | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | | | 2 | **6** |
| L | Latvian | | | | 1 | | 1 | 2 | 1 | | | 1 | 2 | | 2 | | **10** |
| | History | | 1 | | | 1 | | | 1 | | | | | 1 | | | **4** |
| M | Latvian | 1 | 1 | | | | | 1 | 5 | 1 | 7 | 1 | 4 | 1 | | 2 | **24** |
| | History | | 2 | 1 | 2 | | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 16 | | 5 | | 1 | 2 | **32** |
| **Total** | **Latvian** | **2** | **3** | **10** | **7** | **1** | | **5** | **13** | **6** | **8** | **3** | **12** | **5** | **18** | **6** | **99** |
| **Total** | **History** | | **3** | **2** | **6** | **1** | | **1** | **6** | **2** | **16** | **3** | **14** | **2** | **6** | **7** | **69** |

*G – errors in separating coordinated parts of sentence*
*H – errors in separating coordinated parts of sentence with a generalising word*
*I – errors in separating a subordinate clause*
*J – errors in separating a participial clause*
*K – errors in separating an insertion*
*L – errors in separating parts of a compound sentence*
*M – unmotivated use of punctuation*

Only one pupil (No. 6), i.e. 7%, has no punctuation errors, and two pupils (No. 1, 5), i.e. 13%, have 2 errors. Several pupils' works did not contain specific types of errors. This is not necessarily related to knowledge of the use of specific constructions. On the contrary, it has been observed that pupils do not use a variety of syntactic language devices in their examination papers (Straupeniece & Dzintars, 2023a, 70; Straupeniece & Dzintars, 2023b, 643). Some pupils have a very high number of punctuation errors. The highest number of punctuation errors was found in 4 pupils' papers: pupil No. 8 (19 errors: 13 in Latvian, 6 in history), pupil No. 10 (24 errors: 8 in Latvian, 16 in history), pupil No. 12 (26 errors: 12 in Latvian, 14 in history), pupil No. 14 (24 errors: 18 in Latvian, 6 in history).

A comparison of the 2021 data from Kurzeme, Riga, and Latgale (see Table 6) shows that the pupils from Latgale had more punctuation errors in both the Latvian language and history examinations.

*Table 6* **Number of punctuation errors in Latvian and history CE in different regions**

| Subject / regions | Latgale | Kurzeme | Riga |
|---|---|---|---|
| Latvian language CE | 99 | 49 | 61 |
| History CE | 69 | 38 | 49 |
| **Total** | **168** | **87** | **110** |

A higher number of punctuation errors in the Latvian language examination was found not only in Latgale (30%), but also in Kurzeme (22%), and Riga (24%). It means that there are more punctuation errors in the Latvian language exam than in the history exam.

One of the most commonly used syntactic constructions is coordinated parts of sentence. The investigation of the 2021 Latgale exam papers shows that pupils made mistakes in 7% of cases when separating coordinated parts of sentence. In Kurzeme and Riga, 8 cases were found (4 in Latvian, 4 in history) (Straupeniece & Dzintars, 2023a, 65; Straupeniece & Dzintars, 2023b, 638). In the 2018 essays, pupils made few mistakes when separating coordinated parts of sentence or parts of a sentence, i.e. 3% on average (Anspoka & Martena, 2021, 41).

A participial clause is a common syntactic construction in exam essays. In 2021 Latgalian pupils' papers, participial clauses not separated by comma were observed in 14% of cases (in Latvian, the number of errors is almost twice as high). In Kurzeme, it was 18% of cases, and the number of errors was similar in both examinations, the Latvian language and history. (Straupeniece & Dzintars, 2023a, 66). The study of the 2018 pupils' essays found that punctuation marks were not used or misused in 45% of cases when separating a participial clause (Anspoka & Martena, 2021, 42).

The study on secondary school pupils' ability to follow punctuation rules shows both a lack of knowledge and a lax attitude towards writing culture.

**Conclusions**

Latgalian pupils' works in the Latvian language and history state examinations have common features with and different features from pupils' works in other regions of the country. On the one hand, there is an increase in the number of orthographic and punctuation errors in Latgale pupils' exam papers. On the other hand, there is a trend: if a pupil knows the rules of grammar, he/she follows the rules of orthography and punctuation in both the Latvian language and history exams, and vice versa. The highest number of errors is found in the works of some pupils whose mother tongue is not Latvian.

The hypothesis that students have poorer writing skills in the history examination was not confirmed. However, an analysis of the language material suggests that some pupils have deficient levels of language competence in both Latvian and history CE.

At the end of secondary school, the most frequent errors in pupils' work in Latgale were in the use of long characters (many unmotivated long macrons or the lack of them) and the spelling of consonants. Also, there are many unmotivated punctuation errors, errors in separating the subordinate clause and the participial clause. Similarly to other regions, in Latgale, pupils' exam papers contain uniform syntactic linguistic features.

The analysis of the 2021 CE papers shows that the level of language competence of Latgale pupils is low, with a large majority of young people not having a high level of Latvian language proficiency.

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