

Traits Writing

The Writing Traits Model:
Research Proven

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If students are to learn, they must write.

~ National Commission on Writing

With the advent of the Internet, written communication goes on apparently without interruption, and words are more vital than ever in our day-to-day lives and everyday transactions, especially as written material arrives in illuminated flashes via ubiquitous media unheard of even five years ago. Consider this:

- 1,052,803 books were published in 2009—up from 247,777 in 2002—a 325 percent increase (Bowker, 2010).
- 107 trillion emails were sent in 2010.
- 255 million websites now dot the Internet—21.4 million were launched in 2010 alone!
- 25 billion tweets took flight on Twitter in 2010.
- 600 million people cohabit on Facebook. (Pingdom, 2011)

Wanted: Skilled Writers

As the National Commission on Writing makes clear, “Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for many” (2003). And the contexts for writing are expanding. We write more than ever for multiple purposes across a wide range of media. Writing in the 21st century, dominated by technology, is “defined by its frequency and efficiency, and modern writers must express ideas in ways that enable them to communicate effectively to many audiences” (NAEP Writing Framework, 2011). What used to be accomplished face to face or over the phone is now more likely addressed through an email, making the ability to write well more important than ever. Indeed, for corporate America, masterful writing has become a coveted skill—a skill not, however, easily found in new hires. According to a survey of 120 American corporations and in reports that assess student writing proficiency:

- Writing remediation costs American businesses as much as \$3.1 billion annually (National Commission on Writing, 2004).
- About half of private employers and more than 60 percent of state government employers say writing skills impact promotion decisions (National Commission on Writing, 2004, 2005).
- Poorly written applications are likely to doom candidates' chances for employment (National Commission on Writing, 2005, p. 4).
- Thirty-five percent of high school graduates in college and 38 percent of high school graduates in the workforce feel their writing does not meet expectations for quality (Achieve, Inc., 2005).

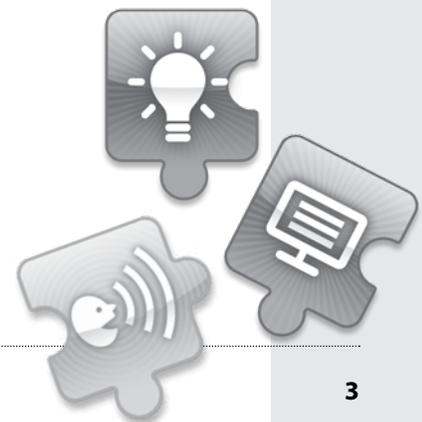
As summed up by Susan Traiman, a director at the Business Roundtable, an association of leading chief executives whose corporations were surveyed in the study, the problem shows up not only in email but also in reports and other texts. "It's not that companies want to hire Tolstoy," said Traiman, "but they need people who can write clearly, and many employees and applicants fall short of that standard" (Dillon, 2004).

The writing challenge often starts well before students are applying for their first job. They may encounter trouble as soon as they arrive in college without the basic academic skills needed for success. Researchers from the Manhattan Institute Center for Civic Policy found that only 32 percent of students leave high school academically prepared for college (Greene & Foster, 2003), and this percentage is even lower among African American and Hispanic students (20 percent and 16 percent, respectively). These figures are troubling because these students are likely to need writing remediation in college. What's more, they are less likely to complete their degree than classmates who enter with stronger literacy skills. And surviving in today's "knowledge age" without a college degree adds to the challenge of finding meaningful work (Trilling and Fadel, 2009).

What We're Doing Wrong

As we might expect, the roots of the problem may well lie in school writing instruction—either its absence or, if not applied well, its presence. The 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports steady gains over the past 15 years in the number of eighth-graders moving from below proficient to basic; however, students have not moved significantly from basic to proficient. Indeed, only one writer in a hundred achieved the distinction of advanced. Multiple studies outline the problem:

- Work sheets and prompts still dominate even though we know they do not lead to thoughtful, complex prose. Indeed, they serve to reinforce the notion that writing is a simple task with one primary purpose: write to satisfy the teacher (Graham & Perin, 2007; National Commission on Writing, 2003).
- The total time students spend writing is equal to about 15 percent of the time they spend watching television (Graham & Perin, 2007). The "Neglected 'R'" report from the National Commission on Writing makes this recommendation: "Double the amount of time most students spend writing and require successful completion of a course in writing theory and practice as a condition of teacher licensing" (2003, p. 3).
- Teachers are bombarded daily by local, state, and federal demands, sometimes at odds with each other. We need an "integrated system of standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment"—one that "makes room for writing as a key instructional strategy in all subject areas while clearly communicating high expectations for student performance" (National Commission on Writing, 2006, p.19). The Common Core Standards represent a first step toward achieving this national goal.



The Writing Trait Model: Research Proven

More than ever, strong, vigorous writing is essential to American productivity and an engaged, intelligent citizenry. No surprise, then, that The Writing Framework for the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress defines writing as “A purposeful act of thinking and expression used to accomplish many different goals” (p. v). For those of us entrusted with fostering new generations of capable and confident writers, we want to make sure that every instructional moment is grounded in sound research and the Common Core State Standards—the state-led effort to establish a single set of clear educational standards aimed at providing students nationwide with a high-quality education. Our goal as teachers is nothing less than helping students become skilled, flexible writers who know their way around a persuasive essay, an inspired narrative, or an expository piece brimming with convincing facts and details. Indeed, the 2011 NAEP Writing Assessment will evaluate students’ ability to “achieve three purposes common to writing in school and in the workplace (the three modes of writing): to persuade; to explain; and to convey experience, real or imagined” (NAEP Writing Framework, 2011).

To this end, we can turn with confidence to more than two decades of convincing research undergirding the Trait Model of Writing, now widely regarded as the gold standard of classroom-based analytic writing assessment and targeted writing instruction. With the Trait Model, teachers and students alike are supported by a continuous teaching-assessing loop.

The Research Behind the Writing Traits

For more than two decades, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (now known as Education Northwest) and other researchers have studied the effectiveness of the Trait Model and the professional development tools used to train the teachers who use it. The traits represent the essential elements of writing inherent in all extended written communication: ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. To date, the largest and most definitive study about the traits of writing was conducted by Education Northwest, Portland, Oregon, and published by the Department of Education, IES (Institute of Education Science) in December 2011. The goal of this five-year study is to provide high-quality evidence of the effectiveness of the analytical trait-based model for increasing student achievement in writing.

Data for this cluster-randomized experimental study were collected from participating fifth-grade teachers and students in 74 Oregon schools. Two cohorts of schools participated in the study across two consecutive years, 2008/09 and 2009/10. Teachers who worked in the 74 Oregon schools were randomly assigned to two study conditions: 1) the treatment condition included 102 teachers and 2,230 students; and 2) the control condition included 94 teachers and 1,931 students. Teachers in the treatment group received professional development that enabled them to implement The 6+1 Trait® Writing Model in their classrooms according to their own style and preferences.

Grade 5 students—23.7 percent of whom were from a minority racial or ethnic group and 48.9 percent were eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch—were chosen as the target population because the development of academic writing skills is key in this grade level. This is a time when students focus on learning expository and persuasive writing, which is used in much of their subsequent academic careers (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010).

Three Research Questions

The experiment was intended primarily to determine the impact of the intervention on student writing achievement during the first year of implementation, under conditions that would be typical for teachers receiving 6+1 Trait Writing professional development. The study was designed to answer one confirmatory and two exploratory research questions. The confirmatory research question was addressed using student essays, collected in September and again in May, and scored holistically for overall writing quality:

What is the impact of 6+1 Trait Writing on fifth-grade student achievement in writing?

The first exploratory research question was addressed using six separate ratings for each of the six traits of writing:

What is the impact of 6+1 Trait Writing on fifth-grade student achievement in particular traits of writing?

The second exploratory research question was addressed using the rating for quality writing from the first analysis:

Does the impact of 6+1 Trait Writing on fifth-grade student achievement vary according to student gender or ethnicity?

The Findings: The Effect of 6+1 Trait Writing on Grade 5 Student Achievement

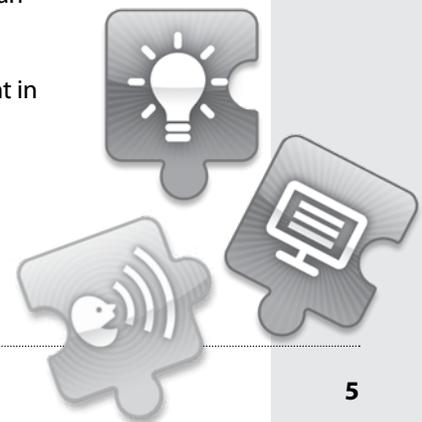
The use of the 6+1 Trait Writing model caused a statistically significant difference in student writing scores, with an effect size of 0.109 ($p=.023$). This means that the estimated average score of students in the treatment group was 0.11 standard deviations higher than the estimated average score of students in the control group. An intervention with an effect size of 0.11 would increase the average level of achievement from the 50th to the 54th percentile.

In addition to the analysis of holistic writing scores, exploratory analyses found statistically significant differences between control and treatment group students on three of the six specific outcome measures of particular writing traits—organization, voice, and word choice—with effect sizes ranging from 0.117 to 0.144 ($p=.031$ to $.018$). For the other three traits—ideas, sentence fluency, and conventions—the mean outcome score of students in the treatment condition was higher than that of students in the control condition, but these differences were too small to be considered statistically significant given the size and sensitivity of the experiment. Additional exploratory analyses of holistic writing scores found no differential effects of the intervention based on student ethnicity or gender.

Additional Large and Small-Scale Studies

Educators who use the Trait Model center both their instruction and their assessment on helping students understand how these elements work together and interact to create a well-written, cohesive piece that accomplishes the writer's goal. Multiple researchers have studied the efficacy of the Trait Model in both large- and small-scale studies:

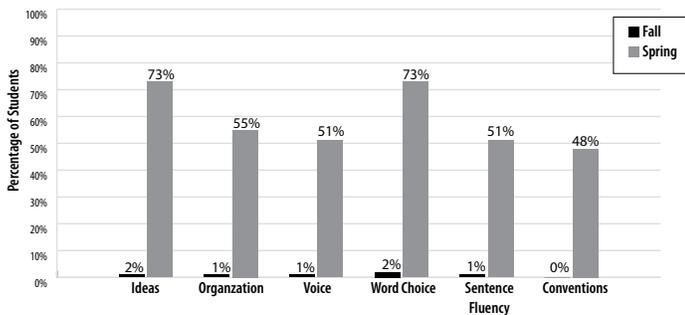
1. A growing body of research is beginning to shed light on classroom strategies and practices that improve the quality of student writing. For example, a recent meta-analysis of research on writing instruction in Grades 4–12 finds support for 11 “elements of effective adolescent writing instruction” (Graham and Perin, 2007a, 2007b). These recommended practices, synthesized from the findings of experimental studies, include having students analyze models of good writing; explicitly teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their work; involving students in collaborative use of these writing strategies; and assigning specific goals for each writing project. These elements are core components of the 6+1 Writing Traits (Culham, 2003) intervention examined in the IES study.
2. In a study conducted by Nauman, Stirling, and Borthwick (2011), the researchers examined the alignment between teachers' underlying attitudes and beliefs about good writing and their assessment and teaching of writing. They found that teachers who value conventions more than other aspects of writing put more weight on conventions in their assessment of student work, while teachers who value creativity and risk-taking tend to reward young writers who exhibit those qualities. The researchers concluded that although values varied, schools were consistent in embracing a standardized method or model of instruction, such as the Trait Model.
3. Reading is critical to students' success in and out of school. Now from Graham and Hebert's 2011 “Meta-Analysis of the Impact of Writing and Writing Instruction on Reading,” we have a much keener understanding of the nature of the reading-writing inter-relationship. Their findings provide empirical support for the long-standing beliefs about the power of writing to facilitate reading. Writing about text facilitates comprehending it, as it provides



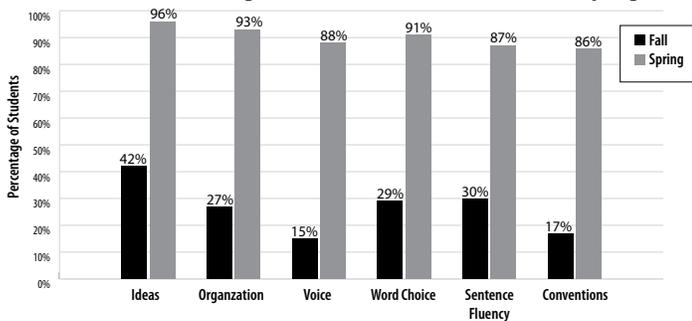
students with a tool for visibly and permanently recording, connecting, analyzing, personalizing, and manipulating key ideas in the text—and this is especially so, if students have received writing instruction that helps them focus on word choice, sentence structure, grammar and spelling, and the like.

4. The Graham-Perin (2007) meta-analysis of writing instruction reveals these key findings about the writing-reading relationship from experimental studies (as summarized by Shanahan, 2011):
 - 93% of study outcomes in which students wrote about text had a positive impact (Grades 2–12).
 - When students were taught explicitly how to write (not just assigned writing), the impact was equally large with poor readers.
 - Writing about text was more powerful than just reading it—or reading it and rereading it, studying or discussing it.
 - Average effect sizes: .40 (11 studies with standardized tests) and .51 (50 studies with other assessments).
5. Kozlow and Bellamy (2004) examined the effects of professional development for teachers using the Trait Model and the extent to which the training influenced students' writing skills. The researchers found that after only a short workshop, teachers understood and were able to implement the model. Teachers also reported that their students understood and were able to apply the traits they taught. The researchers did note, however, that a more robust form of professional development than a short workshop would have had a stronger impact on classroom practice.
6. Coe (2000) demonstrated that writing trait assessments are useful to identify students who might have difficulty on state writing tests and who therefore need extra writing instruction. For example, Coe found that students in the Washington State who had low scores on district-administered Writing Trait assessments were likely to also have low scores on the writing portion of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL).
7. Arter, Spandel, Culham, and Pollard (1994) asked: Does the writing of students who have direct instruction on assessing writing using the six-trait analytical model improve more than that of students who do not have such instruction? The researchers discovered that students' scores increased in direct proportion to the amount of instructional and practice time spent on a trait and the order in which the traits were taught (meaning the earlier a trait was taught, the better students were able to apply it because of the increased amount of time and guidance they received). The study showed that when we focus on the criteria of quality writing—the traits—students show wider overall growth in writing.
8. Additional small-scale studies highlighting the effectiveness of the Trait Model are also available. Most of these studies examined the use of the traits in one school district, one grade, or one classroom. All the studies show increases in student writing performance (Jarmer et al., 2000; Bellamy, 2000). Note the promising test results for six traits in the data from the Blue Springs District, just outside Kansas City, MO. Approximately 950 students in kindergarten through second grade in 13 Blue Springs elementary schools were tested in the fall and again in the spring on their understanding of the six traits: ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, voice, and conventions. In applying all six traits, as Deputy Superintendent Annette Seago effused, the K–2 students made “phenomenal growth” (2011). The proof is in the numbers. In the fall, for example, when the test was first administered, only 14 second-graders demonstrated an outstanding grasp of Ideas; by spring that number had shot up to 262 students. In a similar manner, in the fall, ten second graders scored outstanding on organization; 17 on conventions. In the spring, after immersion in the six traits, those numbers rose dramatically: to 229 and 222 students, 70% respectively. Overall, after a yearlong intensive traits writing program with Dr. Ruth Culham, the district's primary students demonstrated significant writing growth across the six traits. For example, in the fall, just 27 percent of the Blue Springs District's 790 first graders were at or above grade level in their ability to effectively organize their own written compositions (organization is one of the hardest traits for every writer, young or old, to master); by spring, that 27% percentage had surged to 93% (864 first graders were tested).

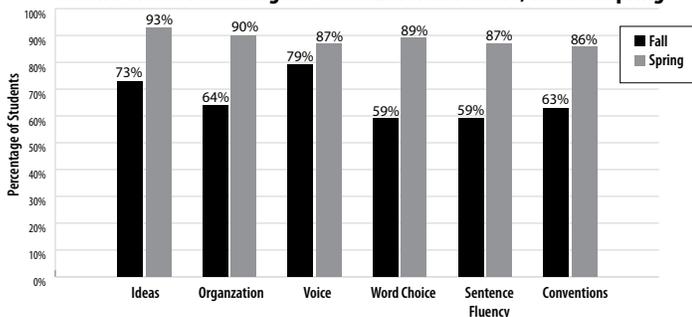
Kindergarten: Percentage at Grade Level and Above, Fall and Spring



First Grade: Percentage at Grade Level and Above, Fall and Spring



Second Grade: Percentage at Grade Level and Above, Fall and Spring



Grade level and above refers to those students who scored a 3, 4, or 5 on the Primary Traits Scoring Guide (Culham, 2005).

Why the Trait Model Works

Consider these explanations of quality writing—and how to achieve it—from four experts on the topic:

An effective piece of writing is produced by a craft. It is simply a matter of working back and forth between focus, form, and voice until the meaning is discovered and made clear.

~Donald Murray

Good writing isn't forged by magic or hatched out of thin air. Good writing happens when human beings follow particular steps to take control of their sentences—to make their words do what they want them to do.

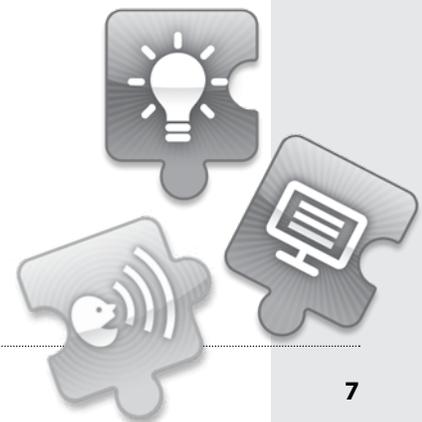
~Ralph Fletcher

Good writing has an aliveness that keeps the reader reading from one paragraph to the next ... write with clarity, simplicity, brevity, usage, voice, and the elimination of clutter.

~William Zinsser

Omit needless words. Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.

~William Strunk, Jr.



All four explanations reflect an emphasis on the writer’s control over the essential elements (or traits) of writing—control informed by the logic of thinking, insight shaped by knowledge of topic, skill bolstered by experience, and, always, a final composition achieved through diligence and determination. Creating writing that hits the mark is hard work. It may be easy to believe that only those born to be writers can really write—and the rest of us can’t. In fact, though, even those with their share of natural talent pursue writing as they would any challenging project—deliberately and methodically, with a vision of the final goal and tight control over the traits alluded to above: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. It only makes sense, then, to teach our students about these critical building blocks of writing: what they are, how they work together, and how to control them effectively to create exemplary writing.

Given the paramount importance of the traits of writing, it shouldn’t surprise us that the 2011 NAEP Writing Assessment Framework will test students on three broad domains—1) development of ideas, 2) organization of ideas, 3) language facility and conventions—and the essential features within each domain. These elements coincide precisely with the traits of writing and their key qualities, as developed by writing expert Dr. Ruth Culham (Scholastic, 2011).

2011 NAEP Writing Criteria for Evaluating Student Responses

Development of ideas is effective in relation to the writer’s purpose and audience.

- depth and complexity
- approaches to thinking and writing
- details and examples

Organization is logical in relation to the writer’s purpose and audience.

- text structure
- coherence
- focus

Language facility and conventions support clarity of expression and the effectiveness of the writing in relation to the writer’s purpose and audience.

- sentence structure and sentence variety
- word choice
- voice and tone
- grammar, usage, and mechanics (capitalization, punctuation, and spelling)

Traits Writing: Chart Of Traits & Qualities

Ideas

- finding a topic
- developing the topic
- focusing the topic
- using details

Organization

- creating the lead
- using sequence words and transition words
- structuring the body
- ending with a sense of resolution

Voice

- establishing a tone
- conveying the purpose
- creating a connection to the audience
- taking risks to create voice

Word Choice

- applying strong verbs
- selecting striking words
- using specific and accurate words
- choosing words that deepen meaning and phrases

Sentence Fluency

- crafting well-built sentences
- varying sentence types
- capturing smooth and rhythmic flow
- breaking the “rules” to create fluency

Conventions

- checking spelling
- punctuating effectively
- capitalizing correctly
- applying grammar and usage

A Writing Revolution: The Instructional and Assessment Breakthrough

The great breakthrough in writing instruction and assessment—showcased in Ruth Culham’s Traits Writing (Scholastic 2011)—is that we now understand how to teach writing in ways that enable all students to become skilled, effective, and thoughtful writers. Traits Writing:

- breaks the traits down into their component qualities and presents them in manageable, spiraled packets of information.
- helps teachers and students read and discuss strong examples of what each quality looks like with exemplary works of fiction and nonfiction.
- encourages writing in the three most common modes (purposes) of writing: expository, narrative, and persuasive.
- shares the common language of writing—made available through the traits and the qualities of the traits—to help students understand what’s working in their writing and what’s isn’t.
- targets the specific skills students need to improve their writing and gives them time to practice those skills by writing on topics that matter to them.

Culham’s Traits Writing takes the guesswork out of teaching and assessing. The instructional clarity it provides—together with the common language to talk about writing and mentors to show the way—makes it an extraordinarily effective system for both assessing and teaching writing.

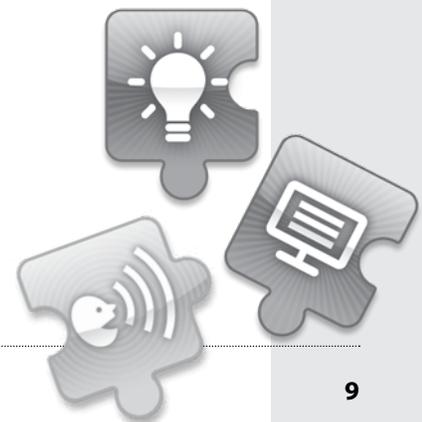
Full-Circle Support

Switching gears for a moment, consider The Bike Kitchen, a nonprofit bicycle repair organization, housed in a cavernous San Francisco garage filled with bike parts, bike tools, and bikes in various stages of becoming. Here, bicyclists can find both tools and expert bike mechanics who volunteer their time to show others how to fix their bikes or build brand-new ones. Step inside and you’re instantly surrounded by the language of bicycles and bike repair: gears, chains, derailleurs. Expert and novice, master and apprentice, work side by side, immersed in the craft of bike building and repair. Experts model for the novices and then guide them through the process. The conversation is spirited, the work focused, and the ultimate goal is quality. You don’t want to point your bike down Filbert Street (one of the steepest navigable streets in the western hemisphere) and discover halfway down that your back brakes don’t work!

The Bike Kitchen provides a spot-on analogy for the kind of classroom we want for our students as we strive to help them understand good writing and craft their own. The effective writing classroom embraces three big ideas about what developing writers (and bicyclists!) need:

- a common language to shape and guide the work at hand
- mentors who model and encourage
- an understanding of what constitutes quality provided by expert feedback and self-assessment

All three are at the heart of Traits Writing. Let’s consider each one in turn.



Let's Talk Writing! The Importance of Sharing a Common Language

Writing is hugely complex and involves the simultaneous orchestration of dozens of moving parts, each attached to dozens more. And it often feels somewhat mysterious—a piece that can inspire or infuriate, enchant or endear arises from a blank screen or sheet of paper. How do you teach young students about something as abstract as “ideas” or “organization”? The question becomes even more challenging when we consider the fact that many teachers, due to lack of time or interest, don't write much beyond letters home to parents, emails to colleagues, or lesson plans for principals. They don't wrestle daily with the exacting work of writing beyond the demands of these perfunctory writing tasks. So how can teachers explain to their students the kind of mental acrobatics needed to write a sizzling persuasive essay?

A shared vocabulary offers the entry point. Just as the novice enters the Bike Kitchen and learns the language of bike forks and gear cables, teachers and students enter Traits Writing and learn the language of writing. Ruth Culham explains:

The traits are an assessment model that over twenty years of development and implementation has found its way into the lexicon of many, many writing teachers. Acknowledging that using a shared vocabulary can be helpful across the grades and over time, these teachers find the traits easy to understand and blend into their writing program—be it highly structured or more informal (2011, p. 220).

Just knowing how to talk about writing makes all the difference. As Education Northwest sums up:

By stepping back and reflecting upon how writing includes thinking, listening, reading, planning, speaking, and drawing, we can see all sorts of possibilities for using the trait language with our youngest learners. We teach our children and ourselves what rubrics are and how to use them in many aspects of their learning and our teaching. If we focus on the language of writing, the common language, then together, K-12, students and teachers alike will come to truly understand the skills required to become a strong writer while working through the process of writing (<http://educationnorthwest.org/resource/464>).

Writing Mentors: Showing Us the Way to Quality Writing

The Bike Kitchen wouldn't exist if not for the kindhearted, generous bike experts who volunteer their time day after day, week after week, to help others build and repair bikes. It's the best of the apprenticeship model—bike expert demonstrates in nonjudgmental, encouraging way; bike novice gives it a go.

And it's the collaborative apprenticeship model (Collins, Brown, Newman, 1989), our most effective way of teaching and learning, that's at play in the effective writing classroom. In a Traits Writing classroom, we find multiple mentors—both the teacher and the works of expert writers that surround the students on the bookshelves. That's right! When summoned—from every book, every written text—authors, both living and not, offer novice writers lessons on every aspect of writing. As literacy researcher Frank Smith (1988) said more than 20 years ago: “Every time we open a book we get a lesson on writing”—how to frame and open a piece, choose a mode to meet our purpose for writing, select just-right words, infuse the piece with voice—all the elements that make writing spirited and a pleasure to read are available in the pages of published works. These so-called Mentor Texts, defined by Dorfan and Cappelli (2007) as “pieces of literature that we can return to again and again as we help our young writers learn how to do what

they may not yet be able to do on their own” (p. 2) teach our students what quality writing looks like and sounds like.

Susan Cooper, Newbery medal winner and perhaps best known for the series *The Dark Is Rising*, explains:

Every writer’s life has been molded by certain key books, read when young. Mine were Kipling’s *Jungle Books*, Stevenson’s poems, the novels of E. Nesbit, Arthur Ransome, Charles Dickens... At least I think they were. The truth is that every book we read, like every person we meet, has the capacity to change our lives. And though we can be sure our children will meet people, we must, must create, these days, their chance to meet books (1994).

And here, research meets literary insights: Graham and Dolores Perin, authors of “Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools” (2007), a report that outlines what’s needed to bring all students up to grade level, note the pivotal relationship between reading and writing by identifying 11 essential elements that help students learn to write. Number ten on their list is “study of models,” which urges teachers to provide students with opportunities to review and learn from models of exemplary writing. How might this be accomplished? The authors explain: “The study of models provides students with good models for each type of writing that is the focus of instruction. Students are encouraged to analyze these examples and to emulate the critical elements, patterns, and forms embodied in the models in their own writing” (p. 20).

This just seems to be common sense: nearly everything we do in life we learn by emulating the models that surround us—whether we are learning to set the table for dinner, build our own road bike, or craft an essay for a college application—we learn by watching others do what we must try and do ourselves.

Getting at the Heart of Quality Writing

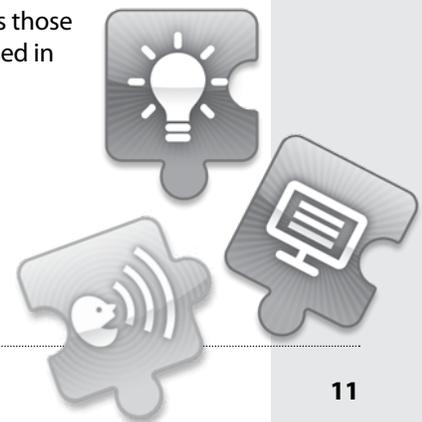
In a Traits Writing classroom, teachers are encouraged to expose students to multiple mentors—not only to published authors, but also to fellow students. Every key quality is showcased by student-written benchmark papers that students assess for their application of the key quality. Students don’t have to guess what they are aiming to accomplish—they can refer to a clear example of writing that works; plus, the teacher delivers a Focus Lesson that spells out exactly what must be done to apply the quality skillfully. Nothing is left to chance: Helping students understand what we mean by “quality” writing is too important not to address directly and explicitly. We show students exactly what we mean so they can work toward creating quality writing themselves. As Ruth Culham (2011) explains, “Writers use reading for inspiration. They mine their reading, and as they sluice the sludge from gold and precious gemstones, they use what they discover to adorn their own writing” (p. 218).

What About the Common Core State Standards?

Traits Writing is meticulously aligned to writing standards—specific state writing standards as well as those included in the Common Core State Standards. The CCSS are divided into four categories, all addressed in Traits Writing:

1. Text Types and Purposes

Center on the modes of writing—expository, narrative, and persuasive; at least two units each year in the traits program explore and practice each mode.



2. **Production and Distribution of Writing**

Feature revising (traits: ideas, organization, word choice, voice, sentence fluency), editing (trait: conventions) and publication of work using technology (trait: presentation). All seven traits are covered within these standards.

3. **Research to Build Writing**

Promote learning to write; throughout the traits program, students write to demonstrate learning (using information collected from multiple sources) and to express opinions and ideas about texts read (supporting textual evidence).

4. **Range of Writing**

Require short- and long-term writing projects. Each week in Traits Writing, students write smaller pieces as well as work on their mode-specific unit project.

Analytic Writing Assessment: Helping Students Understand their Own Writing Strengths and Challenges

Helping our students discover themselves as writers who possess the control and confidence to craft clear, concise writing is our clarion call as educators. We know our students are powerful language users. Every day, in the hallways of our schools (and perhaps too often in class) we hear examples of our students' language virtuosity, switching register every few minutes depending on what they are talking about and to whom (e.g., brash, bold bantering with their peers over lunch; a deferential tone when approached by the principal). How can we harness their authentic voices and help our students create equally potent written pieces? What's needed to channel their strong, engaging oral language into writing that sings?

To this end, we might ask, what makes writing good? How do we know when a piece of writing is exemplary, and furthermore, how do we help our students understand and emulate such a piece so they can craft their own fine writing? One of the greatest weaknesses in much writing instruction thus far is that too often students (and often their teachers) simply don't know what they are aiming for. It's akin to spelunking inside a dark cave without a headlamp to light the way. Enter the traits and their key qualities—a model that illuminates writing and its guideposts (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and finishing/publishing). The Trait Model points the way to competent writing and minimizes stumbles and spills along the way.

The Great Value of an Analytic Stance

Analytic assessment is individualized, focused, and precise, because it requires us to look at writing from multiple perspectives. Like scorers of holistic assessment, those who engage in analytic assessment use a rubric or scoring guide. But they use the rubrics and scoring guides to determine multiple scores for a piece of writing, rather than just one. In Traits Writing, both teacher and student consider 28 different information points (seven traits times four key qualities) as they work to assess papers using the six-point scoring guide for each trait:

The Scoring Guides' Six Performance Levels*

6. Exceptional: the piece exceeds expectations in this trait. It really works well. There is no need for revision or editing unless the writer wants to push further into new territory.

5. **Strong:** The piece is good and strong. It stands on its own. It may need a bit of revision or editing, but nothing the writer can't handle on his or her own.
4. **Refining:** The piece has more strengths than weaknesses in the trait. A moderate amount of revision and editing is needed. Papers that score a 4 are often considered "proficient," which means they meet most state and local standards.
3. **Developing:** The piece has slightly more weaknesses than strengths in this trait. Some revision and editing is needed throughout.
2. **Emerging:** The piece hints at what the writer might do with the trait. Extensive revision and editing are required.
1. **Rudimentary:** The piece does not contain the core features of any of the key qualities for this trait. The writer may wish to start over or abandon the piece completely.

**for Grades 3–8; performance levels for Grades K–2 are Exceptional, Established, Extending, Expanding, Exploring, and Emergent.*

In the process of working to assign scores for each trait, students and teachers simultaneously learn the "language of writing," the components of effective writing, and what's needed to draw together and orchestrate all the moving parts—everything from a rich knowledge of the topic, to the corresponding vocabulary that describes the topic, to the mastery of the conventions such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation needed to describe and present the topic. Again, it takes the guesswork out of both teaching and learning. Teachers and students use the same language to draw from the same set of understandings.

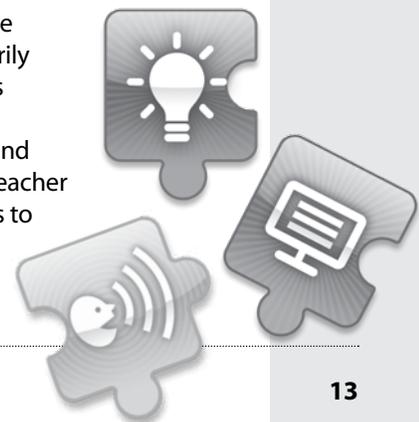
What Writing Does for Us

As educators, we sometimes distinguish between learning to write and writing to learn. In some common-sense way, the two seem different. As our students are learning to write, they are concentrating hard on learning how to make wise choices—even a brand-new writer is faced with countless decisions about how to use nearly every aspect of written language, both global (meaning and structure) and particular (language conventions). Writing to learn, on the other hand, provides an opportunity for students to use writing as a tool: to dig their way into the meaning of a text, strengthening and deepening comprehension (Harvey & Daniels, 2010; Tatum, 2010); or to learn subject matter (Lane, 2008; Gallagher & Lee, 2008). In fact, learning to write and writing to learn are interdependent. The ability to write well is essential for all aspects of our lives—in school and out. And increasingly, it's even tied up in the economic health of the country, prompting this statement from the NAEP Writing Framework:

Americans in the 21st century need to ... communicate in a variety of forms and mediums, create texts under the constraints of time, and play a productive role in an economy that increasingly values knowledge and information. The pace of written communication in today's environment—the velocity of writing—reflects the transition to an information-based economy built on speed, efficiency, and complexity" (NAEP, 2011, p. 1).

The Traits: A Lifeline to Learning

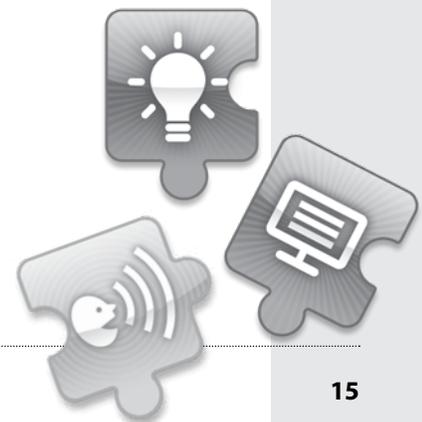
Writing is complex. Whether we are learning to listen for our voice in the first personal narrative we've ever attempted, or documenting our research of metabolic systems, we are engaging in extraordinarily complicated cognitive processes. But teaching and assessing writing need not be complicated. Traits Writing provides the framework and strategies, mentors and resources, that point the way to writing instruction and assessment that are smart, streamlined, and aligned with Common Core Standards and the Writing Framework for the National Assessment of Educational Progress. And for the individual teacher and student, the traits are nothing less than a lifeline to magnificent learning possibilities—as well as to the tremendous satisfaction and advantages that come from learning to write well.



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