

SCHOLASTIC

Instructor

6+1 Traits for Revision

A toolbox of skills to give teachers and students a common vision for revision

By Ruth Culham

Julio scans his teacher's comments on his short essay with increasing perplexity and frustration. He sees the words "Vague. More needed here." Further down he spots the indecipherable comments "Awk" and "Frag" along with marks on the paper indicating spelling, grammar, or punctuation problems. His grade reads "B-; Good start, but please revise."

Good start? Revise? Julio had thought he was done. He'd worked hard to include information about the topic, and had checked the spelling and punctuation. Now he's completely mystified about what to do next.

The Dreaded Word: Revision

Julio's dilemma is one that student writers face every day. He has learned editing skills over the years, but very few revision strategies. He turns in multiple drafts that look much the same because he has not yet built the toolbox of skills he needs to improve his work from the inside out. And because even the idea of reworking the text feels overwhelming to him, he is content to work only on the exterior, putting on a fresh coat of paint and washing windows when what is really needed is a complete remodeling job.

What's missing for Julio and scores of other students is clear communication about the revision process. They and their teachers have not yet discovered the power of a shared vocabulary and a common vision of what good writing looks like. Vague terms, lack of specificity, and an abundance of red pencil marks make it harder to write well, not easier.

The 6 + 1 Traits of Writing offer a solution to this teaching challenge. As students learn the traits, they find that the first five deal with revision, the last two with editing. This breakdown alone is a big step toward understanding how to revise effectively. Here are explanations of each trait, along with a few helpful activity ideas to get your students started on the road to successful revision.

1. IDEAS: The meaning and development of the message, or what the paper is trying to say.

Activity: Pick A Postcard.

Find a set of postcards related to a single topic such as dogs, beach scenes, or city buildings. Give each student a postcard. Ask them to write a paragraph about the image that is so descriptive, readers will easily be able to identify the postcard in the set. Then display all of the postcards. Have students read their paragraphs aloud and see if classmates can guess the card. Explain that the more specific and colorful the details, the quicker the match.

2. ORGANIZATION: The structure of the piece; how the paragraphs are ordered; how the paragraphs flow from one to the next. **Activity: Ten Minutes Only.**

Ask students to draft a story that takes place within a short time frame, ten minutes maximum. Keep an eye on the clock and, every two minutes, tell students to move on to a new event. This activity gives them practice using transitional words and also helps them move their pieces along in segments, developing the action with an eye toward pacing.

3. VOICE: The way the writer brings the topic to life, depending on the intended audience. **Activity: New Voices, New Choices.**

Have students write the first sentence of a letter to five different audiences. If students are studying the effects of global warming, for instance, ask them to write to the local newspaper, their grandmother, an anti-environmentalist, a friend, and the president of a local consumer-rights group. Discuss how the voice will change depending on the intended audience.

Subject: Writing
Process, Teacher Tips
and Strategies
Grade: K-8
Audience: Teachers



4. WORD CHOICE: The specific vocabulary the writer uses to convey tone and meaning. **Activity: Rice Cakes or Salsa?**

As students write, teach them to ask, Is this a 'rice cake' word or a 'salsa' word? Every paper should have salsa words! Use this analogy frequently. One teacher recalls that as she was dismissing class, she said, "Have a nice afternoon and evening." To which a few students replied, Nice is a rice cake word! ?

5. SENTENCE FLUENCY: The way the words and phrases flow throughout the text. **Activity: Music to Our Ears.**

Use the music of classic works such as Peter and the Wolf and Carnival of the Animals to develop sentence fluency skills. Play a piece of music for your students to enjoy. Then play it a second time and ask them to pick a section and write a description of what they think is happening. Challenge them to capture the fluidity of the music in their writing. From Peter and the Wolf, one sixth-grade student wrote: "I could really tell when the scary part was coming. The music sped up and I felt myself tensing up until BAM, the wolf pounced."

6. CONVENTIONS:

The mechanical correctness of the piece. Does it follow all of the basic rules for grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization?

+1. PRESENTATION:

The overall appearance of the work. Is the essay cleanly presented with appropriate margins? Does it have eraser marks on it? Are the pages clearly numbered?

When teachers bring the Traits into their classrooms, piece by piece, day by day, the whole picture of how to create strong, imaginative text is revealed. The Traits allow students to practice revision in small, manageable pieces, building toward competence and independence as they go.

Imagine this scenario: Julio gets his paper back from his teacher. He knows that the word choice in the piece is strong because he went through and changed passive verbs to active ones. He looked for dull, uninteresting words and changed them as he worked with his writing group. Now he reads what the teacher wrote on his paper: "Julio, the words in this paragraph are particularly strong. It really works when you write, 'The grasses swayed in the summer breezes like the curtains at my open window.' Good work with verbs, too. Now, let's talk about getting some sentence variety in your next piece."

And when Julio looks at his grade? It's five out of five points because the class was working on word choice, so that's what was evaluated. There's plenty of time to assess for those sentences next time—after some specific instruction in the Sentence Fluency Trait. After Julio works through the Traits, he has a chance to learn how to write using each of them individually, in pairs, and then as a whole group. He learns specifically how to make his writing strong, revises, then gets a final grade. I wonder what it might be.

About the Author

Ruth Culham (ruth@writingtraits.com), is the author of *6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide* (Scholastic 2003). She also travels the world to conduct workshops on the Writing Traits model.



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ImPROVE It!



Ideas

Explain a detail or describe an idea that makes your story special.

Conventions

Write one sentence that shows perfect punctuation/grammar.

Organization

Write down your lead. Is it a keeper?

Voice

Write down a sentence that makes you feel an emotion. What emotion is it?

Word Choice

Write down three powerful, interesting words or images.

Sentence Fluency

Write down six different words that begin your sentences.
