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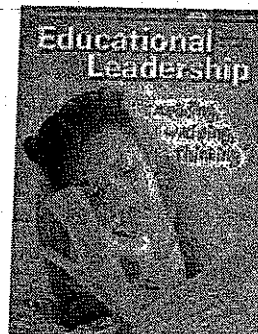
October 2006 | Volume 64 | Number 2

Reading, Writing, Thinking Pages 53-57

The Trait Lady Speaks Up

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We don't teach students to "trait," to "workshop," or to "process." We teach them to write.



October 2006

Everywhere I go, people call me "the trait lady." In the 20 years since the six traits of writing came into being and moved into the writing lexicon of teachers and students, I have traveled around the United States conducting workshops and research to develop and implement the model. It's exciting work that continues to develop and grow as we learn more about high-quality assessment.

The six traits represent a language that empowers students and teachers to communicate about qualities of writing—ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation (a feature of writing often added as the "+1" trait). We use the terms consistently, teacher to teacher, year to year, to build understanding of what good writing looks like and to help students generate texts that exceed our wildest expectations.

However, my work sometimes takes me to schools and conferences where teachers express some strange notions about the traits. So as the trait lady, I'd like to clear up these misunderstandings by addressing five trait myths.

Myth 1: The traits are a writing curriculum.

They're not. The traits have no scope and no sequence that unfold from year to year. We use the traits for assessment and as a shared vocabulary to describe what good writing looks like at every age. Take the ideas trait, for example. A kindergarten student can express an idea clearly and effectively through pictures and early representations of text. A high school student uses extended, more sophisticated text but has a similar goal: to clarify his or her idea. Whether students are 5 or 15, they need to discover what to say, how to narrow their topic, how to use details to elaborate their topic, and how to incorporate accurate information. To help them, we teach students how to write using the ideas trait effectively.

The traits should unfold as lessons and activities embedded in the writing curriculum. If a teacher wants to help students learn how to use details to elaborate on an idea, for example, he or she can begin by bringing in a poster-size print of a complex and interesting painting, such as Picasso's *Guernica*. Students begin by writing down descriptions of what they see. The teacher then covers five-sixths of the print with pieces of precut paper and asks students to describe the smaller, uncovered portions of the painting one by one in greater detail. When the students study the print once more in its entirety, their second round of descriptions is far more focused and detailed than their first.

To be most effective, these lessons should spring out of the grade-level curriculum and connect to important concepts found in literature, science, social studies, math, fine arts, and health. As

such, they're messy, too.

Traits won't solve all your instructional woes. They won't make your class sizes smaller. They won't make students love to revise. They won't help you find time in your busy schedule to talk to students one-on-one about their writing. But they will give students the opportunity to write more, better, and more widely because they reveal much of the mystery of writing. As Donald Murray wrote,

Writing is a craft before it is an art; writing may appear magic, but it is our responsibility to take our students backstage to watch the pigeons being tucked up in the magician's sleeve (Murray, 1985).

To be sure, there is a little magic in writing. But writing is mostly difficult work. Why not tell students so? To ignore the writing process because it is messy, time-consuming, and thought-provoking in favor of canned, rehearsed, teacher- and student-proof lessons from a box labeled "Traits" is taking a big step backward in our practice and teaching of writing.

By helping students focus on what to do as they revise and edit, the traits break down the complex writing process. This is what makes the traits so powerful. They are tools for clear thinking.

Myth 5: The traits are not part of writing workshop.

In fact, the traits are the language of writing workshop. Writing workshop is a powerful organizational structure that provides opportunities for students to think, write, reflect, discuss, revise, edit, and most of all, collaborate. In a writing workshop, students apply the skills they have learned in the context of real writing.

Managing and coordinating the writing workshop can be a challenge. The traits are helpful here because they provide teachers with a built-in model for ensuring that students learn the craft. They offer a common language for assessing and talking about writing, which becomes the core of writing workshop lessons and exposes the "inside-ness" of writing—how texts are formed and how and why they work (Ray, 2002).

Using the Traits as You Conference on Student Work

To see how the traits can help teachers and students focus on the essentials of writing, let's imagine that Tony, the 5th grade student who wrote the following piece, is in your class. You want to zero in on one of the traits—ideas—and give him helpful feedback. First, you read his paper:

How I Know Fall Is Coming

Where I come from, I can tell when fall is coming when tree leaves start to fall. Their colors are red, yellow, orange, and brown. Sometimes I even see people putting leaves in the garbage and little kids jumping into the piles of leaves that they might have just cleaned up!

I can also tell when fall is here because animal coats start getting heavier for winter. They get heavier because they might freeze without it. Soon hibernation means [that some animals] will sleep throughout the winter months. Before they even hibernate, they have to try and find food and a cave or dig for a warm spot to sleep in. I find this out when I can't pick up my cat.

Another way to tell is when sports start. There are so many I can barely name them all, but I'll try: football, baseball, softball, and soccer. These sports all have to do with a ball.

When school starts, it's fall! That means you need to get pens, pencils, paper, notebooks, new clothes, and meet your new teachers. I feel weird when I get into a

<i>How Well Has the Student Focused Ideas?</i>
<p>Scoring Level 5: Strong. Shows control and skill in this trait; many strengths present. Exceeds expectations.</p> <p>The paper is clear and focused. It grabs the reader's attention. Relevant, interesting, and details enrich the central theme.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The topic is narrow and manageable. ■ Relevant, telling, quality details give the reader important information that goes beyond the obvious or predictable. ■ Reasonably accurate details are presented to support the main ideas. ■ The writer seems to be writing from knowledge or experience. The ideas are fresh and original. ■ The reader's questions are anticipated and answered. ■ Insightful understanding of the topic and a knack for picking out what's significant is an indicator of high-level performance, though not required.
<p>Scoring Level 4: Effective. On balance, the strengths outweigh the weaknesses; a small amount of revision is needed.</p>
<p>Scoring Level 3: Developing. Strengths and need for revision are about equal; about half-way home. (See p. 56 for an analysis of student work at this level.)</p>
<p>Scoring Level 2: Emerging. Need for revision outweighs strengths; isolated moments hint at what the writer has in mind.</p>
<p>Scoring Level 1: Not yet. A bare beginning; writer not yet showing any control.</p> <p>As yet, the topic has no clear sense of purpose or central theme. To extract meaning from the text, the reader must make inferences based on sketchy or missing details. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The writer's choice of a topic is bracketing or has not yet decided what the main idea of the piece will be. ■ Information is limited or, unless on the length is not adequate for development. ■ The idea is a simple restatement of the topic or an answer to the question with little or no attention to detail. ■ The writer has not begun to find the topic's meaningful, personal way. ■ Everything seems as important as everything else; the reader has a hard time sifting out what's important. ■ The text may be repetitious or may read like a collection of disconnected, random thoughts with no discernible point.

Source: From *6 + 1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide* (p. 40), by R. Culham, 2003, New York: Scholastic. Copyright © 2003 by Scholastic. Adapted with permission.

As many writers discover—adults and students alike—often the first draft isn't patently wonderful or awful. It's usually somewhere in between, which can make clear communication a challenge as you confer with the author about the piece. But when teachers and students use the same language to think about and work with writing, several helpful ideas spring right out of the scoring guide. Your conversation with the student might go like this:

TEACHER: Tony, let's talk about the ideas in your piece about fall.

TONY: I'm pretty sure I did OK there.

TEACHER: I'm so pleased you're feeling confident. Can you share an example of why you think your ideas are working pretty well?

TONY: Yeah. I stuck with the prompt. I didn't write about anything else.

TEACHER: That's true. And I appreciate how you began to elaborate using some details. Do you like some better than others?

TONY: I think it was funny to mention how fat my cat gets in the winter.

to me thinking they can't write leave knowing they can. That's why I like the traits.

References

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