About 6+1 Trait® Writing and 6+1 Trait® Definitions

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In the early 1980s, creative teachers in school districts across the country decided there must be a better way to gather useful information about student writing performance rather than with single scores or standardized tests. Teachers wanted an instrument that would provide accurate, reliable feedback to students and teachers, a tool that would help guide instruction. When an exhaustive search didn't produce such a tool, they rolled up their sleeves and began the difficult process of creating an analytic scoring system that would be valid, honest, and practical.

After evaluating thousands of papers at all grade levels, the teachers identified common characteristics of good writing. These qualities became the framework for the 6-trait analytical model, which has now grown to include a seventh, +1 trait. The model uses common language and scoring guides to identify the traits year-to-year as we refine our idea of what "good" writing looks like.

Not everyone uses the 6+1 traits: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. Some use four traits; some use more. However, these same six or seven characteristics show up on everyone's list in one form or another. The 6+1 Trait components are the foundation for Education Northwest's writing assessment model and the basis for the descriptive criteria we use to define the qualities of good writing at different levels of achievement. Once teachers know the traits well and score consistently between rates and amongst groups, the link to instruction becomes clear. This is where the real fun begins.

The 6+1 Trait® Writing analytical model for assessing and teaching writing is made up of 6+1 key qualities that define strong writing. These are:

- Ideas, the main message;
- Organization, the internal structure of the piece;
- Voice, the personal tone and flavor of the author's message;
- Word Choice, the vocabulary a writer chooses to convey meaning;
- Sentence Fluency, the rhythm and flow of the language;
- Conventions, the mechanical correctness; and
- Presentation, how the writing actually looks on the page.

Ideas

The Ideas are the main message, the content of the piece, the main theme, together with all the supporting details that enrich and develop that theme. The ideas are strong when the message is clear, not garbled. The writer chooses details that are interesting, important, and informative–often the kinds of details the reader would not normally anticipate or predict. Successful writers do not "tell" readers things they already know; e.g., "It was a sunny day, and the sky was blue, the clouds were fluffy white …" Successful writers "show" readers that which is normally overlooked; writers seek out the extraordinary, the unusual, the unique, the bits and pieces of life that might otherwise be overlooked.

Organization

Organization is the internal structure of a piece of writing, the thread of central meaning, the pattern and sequence, so long as it fits the central idea. Organizational structure can be based on comparison-contrast, deductive logic, point-by-point analysis, development of a central theme, chronological history of an event, or any of a dozen other identifiable patterns. When the organization is strong, the piece begins meaningfully and creates in the writer a sense of anticipation that is, ultimately, systematically fulfilled. Events proceed logically; information is given to the reader in the right doses at the right times so that the reader never loses interest. Connections are strong, which is another way of saying that bridges from one idea to the next hold up. The piece closes with a sense of resolution, tying up loose ends, bringing things to a satisfying closure, answering important questions while still leaving the reader something to think about.

Voice

Voice is the writer coming through the words, the sense that a real person is speaking to us and cares about the message. It is the heart and soul of the writing, the magic, the wit, the feeling, the life and breath. When the writer is engaged personally with the topic, he/she imparts a personal tone and flavor to the piece that is unmistakably his/hers alone. And it is that individual something–different from the mark of all other writers–that we call Voice.

Word Choice

Word Choice is the use of rich, colorful, precise language that communicates not just in a functional way, but in a way that moves and enlightens the reader. In descriptive writing, strong word choice resulting in imagery, especially sensory, show-me writing, clarifies and expands ideas. In persuasive writing, purposeful word choice moves the reader to a new vision of ideas. In all modes of writing figurative language such as metaphors, similes and analogies articulate, enhance, and enrich the content. Strong word choice is characterized not so much by an exceptional vocabulary chosen to impress the reader, but more by the skill to use everyday words well.

Sentence Fluency

Sentence Fluency is the rhythm and flow of the language, the sound of word patterns, the way in which the writing plays to the ear, not just to the eye. How does it sound when read aloud? That's the test. Fluent writing has cadence, power, rhythm, and movement. It is free of awkward word patterns that slow the reader's progress. Sentences vary in length, beginnings, structure, and style, and are so well crafted that the writer moves through the piece with ease.

Conventions

The Conventions Trait is the mechanical correctness of the piece and includes five elements: spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar/usage, and paragraphing. Writing that is strong in Conventions has been proofread and edited with care. Since this trait has so many pieces to it, it's almost an analytical trait within an analytic system. As you assess a piece for convention, ask yourself: "How much work would a copy editor need to do to prepare the piece for publication?" This will keep all of the elements in conventions equally in play. Conventions is the only trait where we make specific grade level accommodations, and expectations should be based on grade level to include only those skills that have been taught. (Handwriting and neatness are not part of this trait. They belong with Presentation.)

Presentation

Presentation combines both visual and textual elements. It is the way we exhibit or present our message on paper. Even if our ideas, words, and sentences are vivid, precise, and well constructed, the writing will not be inviting to read unless the guidelines of presentation are present. Some of those guidelines include: balance of white space with visuals and text, graphics, neatness, handwriting, font selection, borders, overall appearance. Think about examples of text and visual presentation in your environment. Which signs and billboards attract your attention? Why do you reach for one CD over another? All great writers are aware of the necessity of presentation, particularly technical writers who must include graphs, maps, and visual instructions along with their text. Presentation is key to a polished piece ready for publication.