

Enriching the Writing Process with the Six Traits



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If writing were an act of fairytale magic or a matter of wishing, the word *process* would never apply to what people do when they write. All writers would have to do is wave their magic wands, rub their enchanted lamps to make their genies appear, or catch the one fish, from an ocean filled with fish, that grants wishes to the lucky person who hauls it in. I'd like a bestseller about a pig and a spider that live on a farm. Allakazam! Presto! Newbery Medal! Perhaps Roald Dahl was a fisherman and Beverly Cleary was a collector of antique lamps, right? Of course not!

Writers understand that writing is a process involving multiple steps and plenty of time. An understanding of the process of writing is an important foundation for all young writers. Once they have the process in place, students can grasp and use the six traits of writing to help them revise and assess their own work. The six traits support the writing process.

The Writing Process

The traditional view of the writing process is one that involves the following steps or stages:

- Prewriting
- Writing
- Revising
- Editing
- Publishing

1. **Prewriting**—This is the stage in which the writer attempts to find a topic, narrow it, and map out a plan. The writer usually isn't concerned with creating whole sentences or paragraphs at this point. Prewriting is done before the writer begins to write, and it is aimed at defining an idea and getting the writer's thoughts rolling.

2. **Writing**—In this stage, the writer's idea begins to come to life. Sentences and paragraphs begin to take shape. The writer may experiment with different leads. In this stage, writers need to know that they can change directions, cross out words or sentences, and draw arrows to link details that are out of sequence. The term *rough draft*, or *first draft*, refers to writing in motion, changing directions and gradually taking on a defining shape.

3. **Revising**—When writers revise, their topics and ideas come into focus. In this stage, writers do a great deal of math—adding or subtracting single words, phrases, or entire paragraphs. What to revise often becomes clearer to students if they have had some time away from their drafts. Putting a draft away, out of sight and mind, for a few days or even more, may provide a sharper focus on weak areas. A writer might even ask, "Did I really write this?" The efforts made at revision will easily separate strong writing from weak writing.

4. **Editing**—This stage is all about making a piece of writing more accessible to readers. In this stage, writers fine-tune their work by focusing on correct punctuation, capitalization, grammar, usage, and paragraphing. Writers will want to be open to all the technological help (spell checker, for example) and human help they can find.

5. **Publishing**—Not every piece of writing reaches this stage. The term *publishing* refers to something more public than the kind of interactive sharing that should be happening at the previous stages. Writers should carefully select those pieces of writing that will be "published" in the classroom or put on display as finished work. For such writing, final editing and presentation are important. The text should be correct, and the writing should look appealing on the page—enticing to readers. The presentation, or format, should also assist readers in quickly locating information they need.

These steps are often presented in classrooms as being separate, mutually exclusive events. "If I'm prewriting, I can't be revising." "If I'm writing, I can't be editing." "If I'm editing, I can't be revising or publishing." Mature writers know that while the process may proceed through the steps in linear fashion, it is far more likely that the various steps within the process will intertwine. Writing process doesn't seem so overwhelming if a young writer can gain this perspective.

I like to teach students several prewriting strategies—webbing, outlining, making word caches, drawing, and developing a list of questions—but I also like to show them through my own writing, that prewriting and writing can occur simultaneously. Having students experience their teacher as a writer is the most powerful way to demonstrate the importance of each stage and how it connects with the others.

For instance, the best way for me to prewrite is to begin "writing." It is the act of writing that often gets my ideas flowing better than if I tried to make a web of the idea. I can show this to students by writing with them or asking them to coach me. Writing also allows me to demonstrate that I can revise at any time. I can cross out a sentence, change a word, draw an arrow to place a sentence in a different paragraph, add a few words, or move a whole paragraph; all of this can be done while I draft an idea. The option to revise at any time is very freeing. At the same time, I might even notice that I need to fix the spelling of a word or add a period—that's editing! And like revising, it can happen at any time. Of course, once I've revised a draft to the point where I'm happy with it, I'll show students the importance of going back for more thorough editing, taking time to read what I have written aloud, line by line.

Bringing in the Traits

Many young writers speak and act as if they have magical pens or pencils. These are the students who proclaim, "I'm done!" minutes after beginning, or the ones who say, "But I like it the way it is!" when faced with a teacher's suggestion to tell a bit more or to make a few changes. Other students frequently complain, "I don't have anything to write about."

Immersing these students in the writing process with a teacher who is also a writer is the clearest path to silencing these comments. Throw into this mix a strong understanding of the six traits of writing, and you are well on your way to creating passionate, self-assessing writers. Having a chance to assess the writing of others puts students in a place where they don't normally sit—the assessor's chair.

Suddenly, they are in charge. Their opinions are sought. It gives them confidence. The more they assess and discuss, the more they learn about what makes writing successful. Before long, your students will be able to integrate these lessons into their own drafts and revisions.

Traits give both drafting and revision power. Try trait-based instruction. See for yourself.

The “Must-Have” Resource List for Teaching Writing Using the Six Traits

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