GREAT SOURCE **WriteTraits**

Assessment Guidelines for the Classroom:

How Well Do My Students Write?

Vicki Spandel is a respected author and writing expert. She co-directed the teacher team that developed the original 6-trait model in 1984. As the recognized authority of the six traits, Spandel has designed K–12 instructional materials and writing programs including the ***Write Traits*** program.

The best assessment is fully integrated within ongoing instruction, making it easy to assess your student writers *as you teach.* How strong is the writing assessment you do with your students? Here are some questions to ask yourself. Is my assessment:

- **Based on more than one performance?** Research tells us that good assessment does not rely upon a single performance, but upon a body of work, as it is more likely to accurately reflect what a student can do (Stiggins, 2007).
- **Relevant?** Good writing assessment is based on everyday writing your students produce *as they learn,* not just on an isolated assessment that may only occur annually. In addition, writing activities should allow students to demonstrate skills critical to both educational and post-educational success.

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» **Ongoing?** Ideally, your students will be assessed throughout the course of instruction so that they know how they are performing, and what they need to do to improve.

Too often, annual assessments occur late in the school year, and results are slow in coming (students may even forget what they have written)—and may not reach teachers and students before the school year is up. At that point, it is too late to affect meaningful change.

» **Based on solid, proven criteria?** Many rubrics look good at first glance, but closer scrutiny reveals vague language, use of subjective labels *(excellent, good, fair, poor*), overlap across traits to be scored (*design* is synonymous with *organization, content* with *ideas, mechanics* with *conventions,* and so on), or lack of distinction level to level (making it impossible to tell where a score of 3 leaves off and a 4 begins, for example). Often, rubrics reflect the spontaneous wishes of their developers, but have little to do with what actually appears in student writing. Only rubrics developed in conjunction with analysis of actual performance can be expected to serve us well in the ongoing assessment of comparable performance.

The six-trait rubrics are among the most widely used and tested available. They are based on the original six-trait rubrics developed by Oregon teachers in 1984 in the Beaverton, Oregon School District. They have been field tested by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory at various points in time (see list of resources at the end of this article for references). And they have since been revised and used with hundreds of thousands of students at multiple grade levels throughout the world.

» **Valid?** Are students challenged to complete real-world writing tasks? Many on-demand assessments allow for nothing more than the quick writing of a first draft, which is never reviewed, revised, or edited. This measures one kind of skill—rapid response to a surprise topic—but that may not be the most important or relevant skill at the time. If we care about meaningful topic choice, for example, we must make sure that our assessments allow for that. If we care about revision and editing—in other words, a complete look at writing process—we must make sure that our assessments allow time and opportunity for that.

» **Instructional?** Ideally, students will learn to write and revise even as they are being assessed. It is easier to make this happen than we might think. We can start by ensuring that students have opportunities to choose personally important topics, and access to resources such as handbooks, dictionaries, rubrics and checklists, and so on.

Equally important, we can offer writers opportunities to collaborate prior to writing, and prior to revising. Collaboration often becomes an opportunity to share, after the fact. We want students to share "live" (in-process) pieces of writing—even preliminary topic ideas. This kind of open exchange is not cheating. It is stimulation of thought. From talking and interacting, writers gain new perspectives, insight about researching or refining topics, and creative ideas about genre and approach: How might a given piece play as a poem or drama? Would a third-person argument gain power from inclusion of a first-person journal entry? Would video or PowerPoint® be a more effective way to package a persuasive argument for its intended audience?

» **Fair?** Donald Graves said it some years ago: "Testing is not teaching"—and it became the title of one of his best-loved books (Graves, 2002). For teachers of writing, this has numerous implications. Students need a clear and solid sense of process.

What does it mean to choose a topic? Identify an audience? Prewrite? Select an appropriate genre? Draft, revise, and edit? If we have not modeled these things and provided opportunities for students to work side-by-side with teachers, it is unfair to expect them to apply the elements of process in creating original writing.

With the six traits, we also want to look at a trait-by-trait understanding of what makes writing work. It is unfair to assess students on traits they have not been taught. A full and rich snapshot of writing skill takes all traits—Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, and Conventions & Presentation—into account. However, that means students need instruction on each trait. Such instruction includes definition of the trait; presentation of a student-friendly rubric (with opportunities to use that rubric in assessing writing); sharing of literature that shows how professionals use

detail, write strong leads and endings, use voice to engage and move readers, and so on; and opportunities to revise writing by applying the lessons of trait-based instruction.

This step-by-step approach is immeasurably rewarding in its capability to strengthen writing process—especially revision. Students who know and understand the traits of writing suddenly perceive countless revision strategies that did not occur to them previously. They know what is possible. Then, when we assess their ability to revise, we are assessing their ability to apply what they know—not their skill in making good guesses. That's fair.

» **Expansive?** This may be the most important question of all. Too often, writing assessment is narrow in focus. We present writers with a prompt—often something about which we have no vested interest in the answer (e.g., *Describe a day you'll never forget).* We assess students' skill in writing a few coherent sentences on a topic we don't really care deeply about—and (ironically) penalize them if they wander from this topic.

Students are often rewarded for things that have little to do with writing quality: staying on topic (even though the topic is not self-selected and is of no consequence), speed (response is usually timed), and length (we expect a minimum of a paragraph or two, sometimes more). This is a very narrow definition of "writing," especially considering that writing offers us perhaps our best indicator of students' thinking.

Consider what we *could* be looking at through the lens of the traits:

» **Ideas:** knowledge, understanding, insight, perspective, originality, skill in defining a central message, detail, thought, and reflection

» **Organization:** leads that entice readers, logical and easy-to-follow design, surprise, use of transitions, pacing, a conclusion that wraps up a story or discussion, choice of genre, ability to connect ideas

» **Voice:** passion, engagement with topic, excitement, reader awareness and connection, confidence, presence in the writing, willingness to take a risk

» **Word Choice:** originality, understanding of meaning and nuance, connection to voice, connection to mood, precision, imagery

» **Sentence Fluency:** sentence sense, rhythm, an ear for language, effective word patterning, variety in structure, variety in length, purposeful repetition, purposeful use of fragments, authentic dialogue

» **Conventions & Presentation:** knowledge of conventions, care in editing, eye for detail, skill in manipulating conventions to create voice, ability to make reading easy, packaging information in an eye-catching and appealing manner, ability to give main ideas center stage

Trait-based instruction is designed to provide a wide, all-encompassing perspective on writing, including both process and a critical look at product—focusing on all the elements just listed. Though the traits are part of every step within writing process, from planning through presentation, they play an especially important role in strengthening revision.

Many students struggle with revision because they simply do not know what to do when revising their writing. Instruction in the traits helps them see possibilities that stretch beyond correcting spelling or making a draft neat in appearance. Traits help writers revise a lead, add or delete information, do more research in order to know a topic well enough to write with confidence, strengthen verbs, put more variety into sentences, write a stronger ending, and so on. In a trait-based curriculum, students develop and apply revision skills in two ways: they revise the work of others and they revise their own writing.

Why It's Important to Revise the Work of Others

The practice of assessing anonymous samples, identifying problems, and revising to eliminate those problems, provides an excellent foundation for an even more difficult task: reading one's *own* work with a critic's eye and revising it based on what is, not on what the writer "meant to say." Such practice also allows writers to show what they know as critical readers: Can they determine when and why writing is not working? And can they plan effective remedies?

The beauty of rehearsing revision on someone else's work is that, since the writer is anonymous

(you do NOT want to use samples from your own students for this), writers feel comfortable being completely honest about what they see and what could be improved. Such honesty makes for open and enlightening workshop discussion. Second, because the writing is not theirs, students are often willing to be a bit more ruthless in their revision, relentlessly cutting redundant lines, for example, or tearing sentences apart to restructure them. It's hard to remodel a house without tearing out a few walls or ripping up floors. A certain amount of textual "violence" is essential in learning to revise well. The "light touch" usually doesn't do it. But we're all attached to our own writing. Deleting favorite lines and phrases or going in bold new directions can be hard. It gets easier once you've seen the results with someone else's work first.

The format is simple. Use writing samples—one strong, one weak—to introduce a given trait. Discussion and assessment of these samples helps define the trait within writers' minds. Then ask them to revise the weaker sample to see what they can do.

At the end of the unit on that trait, present writers with two more samples—one weak, one strong. This time, students should find it even easier to distinguish between the two, and their discussion will be richer—filled with little things they notice about organization, voice, etc. Again, have writers revise the weaker sample—and expect to see a more confident, expansive revision, with writers applying everything they now know about a given trait.

Why It's Important to Create and Revise Personal Writing

Many writing teachers value having students choose their own topics, not just for the freedom it gives them, but more important, because topic choice is hard. It is one of the things good writers must learn to do—scan the world of experience for writing possibilities and make personal connections. The two best ways to teach this are through modeling and through literature. Teachers who model topic choice have an opportunity to show students that the best topics often come from everyday experience. Good literature gives students countless ideas about potential topics, formats, and genres. So with modeling and the sharing of literature, begins an opportunity for students to create and revise their own writing.

In on-demand assessment, writers must usually submit first drafts for evaluation. There is no time for revision. It can be different in the classroom. Once students finish their drafts, they can put them into their writing folders for a time. This break between drafting and revising helps writers see their work more objectively—and critically.

It also gives you, the teacher, a chance to present focused lessons connecting to a particular trait—and a chance to teach ways in which Conventions & Presentation connect to that trait. For example, careful editing makes ideas clear, paragraphing makes organizational design easy to follow, etc. Focused lessons on such things as narrowing a topic or using sensory details, provide valuable skills in planning, drafting, revising, or editing writing. Once students have finished several focused lessons, they can return to their own drafts with new skills and insights, and apply what they have learned in revising their own work.

With so many revision possibilities out there, how would we ever teach them all?

We probably cannot teach all of them—but we can teach more if we're organized about it—and the traits help us to get organized. We can teach skills connected to ideas, then add new skills connected to organization, then voice, then word choice, then sentence fluency. With each new set of lessons, students' revision skills expand and grow. And if they create a new piece of writing in conjunction with each trait, they have multiple opportunities to practice those revision skills. It isn't necessary to be rigid about this. Of *course* it's fine to talk about strong word choice while teaching the trait of Ideas—or about strong verbs while working on leads. The point is, emphasizing a particular set of skills helps writers organize things in their mind, too. Suddenly the huge task of "writing" feels manageable.

As they work their way through all six traits, writers create multiple drafts—one for each trait they're focusing on. This is important because as each trait unfolds, writers learn new ways of making writing stronger. Having additional chances to write allows them to reveal new skills and growing control over conventions. So they:

- assess and discuss the writing of others
- write rough drafts and put them away for a time
- work through lessons that develop specific skills
- assess and discuss more writing
- revise someone else's work using skills they have learned

- revise their own work using skills they have learned

It is a simple cycle, but a dynamic and powerful one. Its predictability allows students to plan—to think like writers as they are reading and discussing writing. Recurring opportunities for writing help students experiment with new topics and genres, write for different readers, and stretch their abilities to the maximum.

Each revised draft can be assessed on the six-trait scale—but it's important to focus only on those traits you have taught up to the point of the revision. You will want to consider the quality of the *final* draft, as assessed by you using the Six Trait Scoring Guide. You will also want to think about the extent and nature of the revision, based on your comparison of rough and final drafts.

This body of work, taken as a whole, will provide an accurate indicator of students' writing skills. And because you will have taught them to be good assessors of their own and others' writing, they will know precisely what their own strengths and needs are, even without feedback from you. That's a bonus.

How Does the 6-Trait Model Differ from 6+1?

It differs very little—it's simply a matter of how the traits are organized. The latter is, in effect, a 7-trait model, viewing presentation (format and layout) as a trait unto itself. In the 6-trait model, Conventions & Presentation are viewed as one complete trait, and the reason for this is simple. Both components are part of the editing and publishing process. They're designed to make writing readable and appealing for an audience.

Level 1 editing deals with conventions—ensuring correctness, but equally important, clarifying meaning, and bringing out voice. Consider how differently these sentences might be read:

- Let's eat, Grandma.
- Let's eat Grandma.
- Let's eat GRANDMA??!!
- Let's *eat!* Grandma?

See? Correctness is only the beginning.

Level 2 editing deals with visual conventions—presentation, or the packaging of the final product. This is where such considerations as font, color, white space, visuals, placement on the page, and overall design come into play. Presentation works hand-in-hand with conventions to support the writer's message and to ensure it is interpreted as the writer intended—and remembered. Presentation is more important to some documents than others. It is vital, for example, to a book cover, movie poster, menu, wedding announcement, advertisement, or Web site—and somewhat less important for a simple paragraph, grocery list, or e-mail. This means presentation can be increasingly emphasized with certain documents designed for certain purposes. We must also ensure that students who are assessed on presentation, have the time and opportunity to create effective document design. They should also be given instruction in the skills (notably technological skills) required to create the desired presentation.

Tips for Assessing Well

Following are some suggestions for assessing your students' work (at the classroom level) as effectively and thoroughly as possible.

1. Use a rubric and know it well.
We encourage you to assess your students' writing using the Teacher Six Trait Scoring Guide.

Be sure *you* are thoroughly familiar with this rubric. That means feeling comfortable assigning scores on all traits. Consider practicing scoring before assigning, and recording scores that will become part of a student's grade. The text *Creating Writers* by Vicki Spandel (see resource list), provides numerous student samples for practice. Visit **gsprofessionaldevelopment.com** for additional samples.

2. Assess cumulatively, based on what students have learned.
Realize that after teaching Ideas, you will assess students' writing on that trait—plus Conventions & Presentation. At the end of your next instructional trait (on Organization), you will assess student writing on Ideas *and* Organization (plus Conventions & Presentation), and so on. Once you have presented all six traits, you will assess students' writing on all traits.

3. When assessing revision, look for change.
Assess students' revisions first by scoring the revised sample to see how strong it is in the focus trait. But also ask, "How far did the student's revision take the draft? Is it more readable than the rough draft? More appealing?" An improvement

of even one point on the 6-point scale indicates a good effort. A student who does a stronger, more thorough revision (takes the paper from a 2 or 3, let's say, to a 5 or 6) should receive more credit.

(Most sample papers that are suitable for revision practice, would initially score a 2 or 3 in a given trait.)

A 6-point scale is sometimes called a "leap the river" model because papers are either in need of extensive revision (scores of 1, 2, or 3) or they leap the river into the land of proficient writing (scores of 4, 5, or 6). Therefore, the goal is always for student revisers to improve a paper enough so that it scores 4 or better. If a paper is already at that level (or higher), the goal is either to raise the score by one point or simply find a viable, creative way to improve the writing. Even a paper that scores a 6 can always be improved in some way. After all, some pieces are off the chart.

4. When scoring Conventions & Presentation, focus on what you have taught.
It is impossible, of course, to cover *all* of the issues related to the broad topic of Conventions & Presentation, but you can cover many. With conventions, focus on what your writers need most, using your own review of their work. You may also wish to look at Jeff Anderson's book *Mechanically Inclined* (see resource list) for a very useful list of common conventional problems—such as matching subject and verb, or avoiding shifts in tense.

You can teach presentation through examples: posters, newsletters, book covers, Web sites, and so on. As much as possible, however, connect your instruction to students' needs. What are *they* writing (in your class or other classes)? Picture books? Letters? Reports? Video scripts? Be sure your instruction supports their writing needs.

5. Score presentation ONLY on assignments where students have opportunities to demonstrate relevant skills.
As noted earlier, presentation is far more important in some kinds of writing than in others—newsletter copy, a book cover, or any document that must capture a reader's attention—even before the reader thinks about content.

Much of the writing produced in school does not meet this criterion because it has very few presentation issues beyond general neatness (particularly if students do not have computer access). You don't want your presentation scores to reflect something as banal as margins or nice handwriting. Your focus should be overall document design—and that means font choice, use of white space, use of visuals, etc.

6. Consider the BIG PICTURE for your classroom.
Students' skill in revising their own or others' work is important. But your overall assessment of their writing may need to include other things as well, depending on what instruction in your classroom looks like. To get the big picture, take a few moments to consider how your students are spending their time. Then think *process + product.* Make a list of what is most important and the information you need to make a good judgment about their growth and performance as writers. Here are some examples of other things you *may* wish to assess (and you may also have personal additions to this list):

- Participation in the writing process. Do students prewrite/plan their work? Do they participate actively in peer response groups? Do they revise and edit? Do they write in multiple genres, for multiple purposes and diverse audiences?
- Participation in the reading process. Do students choose books for themselves? Do they share—in writing or orally—thoughts on what they have read? Do they complete assigned reading? Do they participate actively in discussions of literature? Do they make connections between literature and writing?
- Spelling skills
- Vocabulary growth
- Audiovisual literacy (incorporating technology into writing)
- Research skills
- Design and completion of special writing projects

7. Remember the value of observation.
Assessment takes many forms, and it does not always involve testing—whether via on-demand writing or some other form. Observation also plays an important role.

You may find you learn almost as much watching and listening to your students during an active discussion of a writing sample, as you learn from looking at their actual revisions. As you listen, ask yourself questions like these:

- Do my students understand what makes

writing work? Can they define a given trait—Ideas, Organization, Voice—in their own words?

- Do students recognize strong writing when they read or hear it—and can they explain what makes it strong?
- Do they recognize a weak piece of writing, and can they describe the problem(s) in very specific terms?
- Do they know what kinds of problems are likely to occur in conjunction with each trait?
- Once they have identified a writing problem, can they brainstorm ways of solving it?
- Do students recognize these strengths and problems in *any kind* of writing—not just student samples, but newspaper articles, journal articles, advertising, technical documents, public relations materials, and so on?
- Can they coach other writers in making their writing stronger?
- Can they coach me (their teacher) as I write or model revision and editing?
- Do students approach a writing conference with specific questions in mind or problems to resolve?
- Are students thinking like readers as they write? Can they identify little things professional writers do that make their writing strong—things students could try in their own writing?

8. Consider using portfolios.
A portfolio is an invaluable assessment tool because it offers visual evidence of the very thing many teachers are most interested in: *growth over time*. Anyone who has participated in a student conference knows that nothing speaks louder than samples of actual work.

When these samples are collected over a period of time, dated, and systematically organized, they offer a visual journey of performance that reflects where a student began, what he or she learned along the way, and where that student is right now on his or her way to becoming a stronger writer. Trait-based instruction supports portfolios beautifully because students are asked to demonstrate revision skills and create original work at regular intervals. In addition, that work reflects focus on specific skills: identifying and exploring a topic, organizing information effectively, using voice to reach readers, and so on. With each unit of instruction, students reach a new milestone of performance. Your students' portfolios might include:

- Revised or edited writing samples from other writers
- First drafts of original writing
- Revised or edited original drafts
- Samples of effective presentation
- Lists or reviews of favorite books
- Reflections (personal thoughts) on performance or growth as a writer
- Lists of personal goals

In the end, one of the best measures of your assessment is the "portfolio" each student carries in his or her mind and memory. How does that student view his or her journey as a writer? Is there a strong, almost irresistible sense of forward momentum? Do goals feel realistic and achievable—but also personally important in the larger context of that student's life? Does the student write with confidence? Approach new writing opportunities with a sense of joy, adventure, and curiosity? Look forward to the thousands of ways writing will enrich his or her life? Above all, you want each student to survey the landscape of his or her writing and say—without the slightest coaching from you—"Here are some things I do well. I am a writer."

Recommended Resources for Further Information on Sound Assessment Practice

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Tomlinson, Carol Ann. 2003. *Fulfilling the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom.* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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