

The Trait Lady Speaks Up

Ruth Culham

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

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.

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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 you examine your curriculum with "trait eyes," you'll see the connections. Seize on them. If you are studying the water cycle, for example, think about how organization is built into this concept and how you will develop the vocabulary that your young scientists need to describe condensation, evaporation, precipitation, and collection. You will be working on two traits at once—organization and word choice.

Use the traits to assess student writing to understand what students know and can do. Then focus your writing lessons and activities so that students can improve their writing within the curriculum you're expected to teach. Use all the traits all the time. Forget any misguided notion that you should teach only a few traits to younger students or that you should assign different traits to different grades. Students need all of the traits at every grade level every time they write. The traits tell writers what they are doing well and what they still need to work on. And they give teachers an effective instructional road map. The traits bring the writing curriculum to life. But they are *not* the curriculum.

Myth 2: The writing process and the traits are different things.

Actually, they're two sides of the same coin.

The elegant, creative, renewable writing process is built around the notion that writers go through a series of reflective thinking stages as they write. The first five traits—ideas, organization, voice, word choice, and sentence fluency—are most helpful for refining, editing, and revising a piece for clarity. As the writer drafts, he or she considers such questions as, How clear is my idea for the reader? Have I put

my ideas in the most logical order? Is my use of voice appropriate for the intended audience? Have I chosen the best possible words to convey the idea? Do my sentences flow smoothly? When it's time to edit, students tap into the last trait—convention—as well as the “+1” trait of presentation as they check spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and paragraphing, along with the piece's visual appeal.

Many people think that making students aware of the traits is the answer to teaching writing. But it's not the magic bullet any more than writing workshop is. The writing traits are a fine assessment tool and a kind of language to communicate about writing. Writing workshop is a structure to encourage writers to write often and for a variety of purposes. And writing process is just that: a series of reflective stages that writers go through as they figure out what to say and how best to convey it in writing.

Myth 3: You adopt the traits program.

The traits are a model, not a program. A model is highly flexible; teachers can use it in a variety of ways within a writing program. A program is different; you bring a program into your classroom in the form of books, teacher's guides, and activities for skills practice.

If you select a program to help you teach writing, make sure it promotes the writing process. Whether or not it lists traits is of little importance. You should build your curriculum around books, magazines, texts, and other rich models that help students aspire to write clearly and effectively. Your teaching should include using traits as a model to demystify the revision and editing processes. Use the traits as the language of writers who are desperate to figure out how to be clearer, more powerful, and more interesting. The traits will help writers long after that shiny new textbook is cast aside for its new big brother or sister.

Myth 4: You teach the traits, and the writing takes care of itself.

The traits are not a replacement for teaching. I once heard a university English professor who works with preservice teachers say, “Thank goodness for these traits. Now I don't have to try and teach that messy writing process anymore.” But the traits are part of the writing process, and 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 new grade in the fall.

You then assess the piece with the 6+1 scoring guide descriptors specifically reflecting the ideas trait (see fig. 1, Culham, 2003). You see that the writing aligns with level 3: The writer is beginning to define his topic, even though development is still basic or general.

Specifically, you might assess Tony's piece as follows (the initial comments are the 6+1 scoring guide descriptors for a level 3 piece of writing for the ideas trait; the comments in italics are specific to Tony's essay):

- The topic is fairly broad; however, you can see where the writer is headed.

The piece is about the arrival of fall; the writer shares a few general examples of how he knows the season is upon him.

- Support is attempted but doesn't go far enough in fleshing out the key issues or story line.

The writer doesn't go into examples in enough depth to make the idea his own nor does he share fresh information.

- Ideas are reasonably clear, although they may not be detailed, personalized, accurate, or expanded enough to show in-depth understanding or a strong sense of purpose.

We understand what this writer is saying, but without more examples or details, we have only the most general understanding of his thoughts on this topic.

- The writer seems to be drawing on knowledge or experience but has difficulty

Figure 1. 6+1 Trait Writing: Scoring Continuum

<i>How Well Has the Student Tackled Ideas?</i>
<p>Scoring Level 5: Strong. Shows control and skill in this trait; many strengths present. Exceeds expectations.</p> <p>This paper is clear and focused. It holds the reader’s attention. Relevant anecdotes 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 present 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. • Insight—an understanding of life and a knack for picking out what is 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 paper has no clear sense of purpose or central them. 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 is still in search of a topic, is brainstorming, or has not yet decided what the main idea of the piece will be. • Information is limited or unclear or 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 define the topic in a meaningful, personal way. • Everything seems as important as everything else; the reader has a hard time sifting out what is important. • The text may be repetitious or may read like a collection of disconnected, random thoughts with no discernable point.

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

going from general observations to specifics.

More examples—such as how heavy the cat becomes once it gets its winter coat—would improve this piece. Lists of colors and sports are not as effective.

- The reader is left with questions. More information is needed to fill in the blanks.

It would be interesting to know why this writer thinks the sports listed relate to fall; the only reason given is that they all require a ball, which has nothing to do with the season.

- The writer generally stays on topic but does not develop a clear theme. The writer has not yet focused the topic beyond the obvious.

The writer tries valiantly to stay on topic, but he has not thought about how to make this piece more than a prompted writing that answers a question. To go to the next level in ideas, he should develop a theme, an underlying truth or understanding that takes the reader farther and deeper.

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.

TEACHER: I thought so, too. That’s an effective detail that shows an example of what you said previously, about animals getting thick fur coats. What do you think about moving it to the second paragraph, right after that first sentence? Then you might describe in even greater detail how the cat looks and feels and what makes it so heavy.

TONY: Yeah. I could do that.

TEACHER: Are there other details like that one?

TONY: Not really. I guess I should add some more. Maybe I could choose just one favorite fall sport. I am going to be signing up for citywide basketball league this fall, and I'm going to be the best point guard in the league. I've been working out every day and getting in shape.

TEACHER: Now you're talking! Don't worry about writing this whole piece over at this point. You've got some good ideas, just like you said. You just need to focus on adding more specific details in the most important parts. You might even want to move some things around or cut out parts you don't like as much. Take a pencil and go for it. Mark it up. I'll be back to see how you're doing in a few minutes.

Notice how the conversation moves from trying to cover the trait of ideas into a back-and-forth dialogue on the use of detail. Don't swamp student writers with every last thing in the world they can do to improve a particular piece of writing. Ralph Fletcher, author of numerous books for young readers, has a wonderful saying: "Squeeze it once, and let it go." I so believe this. If Tony works over this piece to add some interesting details, it will strengthen

the ideas. And he will have added a new skill to his writing bag of tricks. But most important, he won't get overwhelmed.

Moreover, if students hear the term *ideas* used consistently from year to year to describe how well they succeed in selecting and developing a topic with interest and insight, if they learn new revision techniques from minilessons and mentor texts that strengthen their ideas, this is good teaching, right? Using the same terminology from year to year is crucial for building deep understanding. Just as math teachers continue to use the terms *addition* and *subtraction*—instead of inventing new ones at different grade levels, like *plusing* and *minusing*—so should teachers of writing consistently use the same terms. Otherwise, students might think they're learning something new, which would surely lead to confusion.

So Where Does This Leave Us?

We use the writer's vocabulary—the 6 traits +1—to celebrate what works in a given piece of writing, to explain what still needs work, and to offer advice on how to improve. But you can't just throw a trait out there and expect it to make a difference. When you assess a student's piece of writing and find it lacking in some aspect of a trait, grab the trait and break it down to its various components so the student

can learn what to do to improve in this area. For example, through lessons and activities on sentence fluency, students can learn to write different kinds of well-constructed sentences, vary the length of sentences, experiment with fragments, and learn to hear the rhythm and flow of smooth, connected sentences.

As language arts educators, we've navigated some treacherous waters in the past decade. We survived the reading wars and came out on the other side with a renewed commitment to support each student on the journey to become a reader. Let's not take sides in writing. We waste valuable time and energy fussing about the "trait" camp versus the "writing process" camp versus the "writing workshop" camp. We're all trying to do the same thing:

help students learn to write well. When these three powerful ideas coexist in writing classrooms, both students and teachers win.

As "the trait lady," I'm convinced that the six traits improve student writing. Students who come to me thinking they can't write leave knowing they can. That's why I like the traits.

References

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Ruth Culham is President of the Culham Writing Company and former Assessment Program Unit Manager at Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory; ruth@culhamwriting.com.