

6 Trait[®] Writing Assessment Model

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Over the past few years, a new model for helping teachers evaluate and coach students' writing has grown very popular, particularly among school districts in the Pacific Northwest. Known as the Six Trait Writing Model of Instruction and Assessment, this “rubric” is designed to help teachers grade and guide children in six specific areas of writing:

1. **Ideas and Content**
(thoughts and ideas are meaningful, complete)
2. **Organization**
(presentation is logical and natural)
3. **Voice**
(tone, flavor to the message, sincerity)
4. **Word Choice**
(vocabulary is precise, interesting and natural)
5. **Sentence Fluency**
(flow & rhythm, strong and varied sentence structure)
6. **Conventions**
(grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling)

A complete and easy-to-use description of these six traits (plus one more) can be found at the Education Northwest website: www.educationnorthwest.org/traits/trait-definitions

With these tools, teachers have been able to more fairly evaluate the different aspects of children's work, giving a score of 1–5 for each trait, thus being able to acknowledge their students' strengths as well as helping them to discern weaknesses. Additionally, the Six Trait analysis model can help teachers choose good books and good stories as models for children to read—which will surely affect how they write. Ever searching for a more

specific answer to the question, “What makes good writing?” we find a helpful tool in this Six Trait evaluation model.

Although many teachers have improved in their ability to identify areas of strength and weakness, the question remains, “How can I get my kids to improve in their weak areas?” Unfortunately, the Six Trait assessment model does not include a clear methodology for teaching to those traits. In fact, some teachers have expressed frustration at knowing what “voice” is, but not having tools to help children develop their voice. What about the children whose biggest problem is finding “content”? How does one model “organization” for a student? How can they develop better “word choice”?

The Structure and Style Syllabus is a profound support for those teachers using the Six Trait evaluation. How?

1. Ideas and Content: We clearly know from our success with reluctant writers that having the ability to think of something to write must not be a prerequisite for learning how to write. By having source texts from which to take content, a student can begin developing skills without having to also think up ideas at the same time. As he uses information and stories provided for him, he begins to build confidence. Subsequently he will experiment with variations on that content, and ultimately he will be able to bring his own original ideas onto paper. But for many children, and particularly the reluctant ones, developing “ideas and content” must be a gradual and safe process.
2. Organization: Is there a better way to learn to organize one’s writing than to follow a model where each paragraph has a specific purpose? Facts are organized by topic. Stories have a sequence. Let students use a model, master a model, and finally they will have the ability to be free of the model and stay organized. Our structural Units 1–9 provide these very models for teaching “organization.”
3. Voice: Children learn to speak their native tongue just like their parents and peers. Individuality, or “voice,” will come through the filter of their environment and their past. Until they have a bank of language and life experience upon which to draw, they can practice voice by experimenting with different stylistic techniques: adverbs,

strong verbs, very short sentences, alliterations, similes, triples, etc. Appropriately, the advanced style checklist can become a tool for “vocalization” practice while a child develops and learns to articulate his own individual “voice.”

4. **Word Choice:** Strong verbs, quality adjectives, banned word substitutes, “ly” word lists, “My Own Thesaurus”—all these will strengthen vocabulary and make available a broader range of words to choose from. Will there be awkward usages? Of course. But like practicing a musical instrument, the student improves by doing. Making available a wide range of words in as concrete terms as possible, the most successful teachers will see gradual but continuous improvement in “word choice.”
5. **Sentence Fluency:** This is the one area where our syllabus in style can contribute the most. How do you get kids to use a variety of structures? Teach it. Model it. Require it. Even with occasional forced usages, utilizing a checklist with “dress-ups” and sentence openers will almost always create more flowing prose. By eliminating the tedious repetition of subject nouns and pronouns, required adverbial and “who-which” clauses will enable anyone to improve in “sentence fluency.”
6. **Mechanics: Announce the law:** There’s no such thing as a first and only draft. By making a habit of always rewriting everything until it is correct, students will gradually develop the necessary attention to detail about punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Be merciless with your policy, and skill in mechanics will follow.

The Six Trait model has provided many teachers with a better way to evaluate their students’ writing. The Structure and Style syllabus gives specific tools to teach those six traits. During one of the Student Writing Intensive classes last summer, a young girl who attends public school and had been learning about the six traits in her fifth grade class, remarked to her mother, a teacher, “Mr. Pudewa teaches the Six Traits, he just doesn’t know it.” Children often see facts more quickly than we do, and it is indeed clear that the Excellence in Writing syllabus of Structure and Style will support and strengthen the efforts of the many teachers who use the Six Trait Writing Model of Instruction and Assessment.