

Inspiring Young Writers with the 6-Traits Writing Model

Does the next J.K. Rowling attend Palos East, West, or South? Maybe so! Writing instruction in Palos 118 is getting a make-over with the implementation of the 6-Traits Writing Model. This approach emphasizes the use of mentor texts (picture books or excerpts from novels or non-fiction texts) to provide strong examples of good writing for students to emulate. Mini-lessons drawn from the mentor texts and frequent opportunities to write short pieces focusing on one or more of the traits help students to practice “authoring” and to see revising and editing as important parts of the writing process. All of the traits will be addressed in age-appropriate ways at every grade level, K-8. Common terminology, visual icons, and instructional strategies will provide continuity and alignment of instruction as students advance to new grade levels and work with different teachers.

The 6-Traits Writing Model was developed at The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) in the early 1980s. Extensive research and widespread implementation in the three decades following this early work has confirmed the value of focusing writing instruction on these basic traits found in all writing. 6-Traits research on writing instruction and assessment is reflected in the learning standards and assessment rubrics for Illinois and many other states.

The 6-Traits Writing Model is made up of six key qualities that define strong writing. These are:

- **Ideas**, the main message
- **Organization**, the internal structure of the piece of writing
- **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

You should see these traits described and displayed in your child’s classroom, the library-media center, and other locations in our schools. We are excited to offer this motivating and effective approach to writing to our students!

The NWREL website offers expanded definitions for each trait, as follows. We have included the graphic “icon” that we are using to identify each trait to help students remember these important elements found in all writing.



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. This 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, a +1 trait to be introduced when students publish a finished formal writing piece.)

Source: <http://www.thetraits.org/definitions.php>