

The Writing Traits

Have you ever sat next to a student during a conference, read over their work, smiled at them, and drawn a blank?

Or have you ever found yourself constantly discussing spelling and punctuation during conferences, like some annoying earworm?

The Six Traits

I have a compelling suggestion: Think about the traits! By using this simple framework, you'll be able to analyse student compositions and develop feedback that focuses on exactly what your class—and each individual student—needs. We can use the framework to analyse and discuss the work of authors, and to plan and revise our own writing.

Ideas

The main content/ message and supporting details

Organisation

The structure and the flow of writing (When working with teachers, you'll often hear me say: Leads! Ends! Order! Pacing! Title!)

Voice

The author's perspective and style, with consideration for the audience

Word Choice

The variety and precision of vocabulary

Sentence Fluency

The rhythm, the flow, and the sound patterns in sentences that make them interesting and pleasant to read. Think about varied sentence beginnings, varied sentence lengths, and the ability of the reader to read the piece aloud without stumbling – it should sound good to our ears! Good writers know how to 'subvert' what they know about English grammar to create memorable sentences!

Conventions

Spelling, punctuation, grammar, capitalisation



History of the Traits

The writing traits have been around in one disguise or another for quite some time.

Emig (1971), Flower and Hayes (1981), and Applebee (1986) researched and wrote about the writing process – planning, drafting, and revision.

Diederich (1974) identified five characteristics of writing way back in the 70s, and this work became the basis for the first iteration of the six traits approach to classroom assessment of student writing.

A group of teachers in the US analysed thousands of pieces of student writing and identified common characteristics of ‘good writing’.

They developed a shared language to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a composition. Hillocks (1986) conducted a meta-analysis in the 80s, and examined six types of instructional focus.

Purves (1988) used classroom-based analytical assessments of student writing to inform diagnostic decisions about writing instruction.

Then Ruth Culham developed the The 6+1 Trait® Writing model (2003), and others developed their own expensive resources for teachers to use.

Don’t take my word for it; punch ‘writing traits’ into a search engine and you’ll be agog with the amount of (well-meaning) sites looking to cash in on the framework.

How can we use the traits?

I like to organise my whole class mini-lessons for writing, and some whole-class experiences, around the traits, explicitly teaching strategies that young writers can use to improve their compositions.

I also like to use my most recent mini-lessons to guide my conferencing for the week, unless analysis of a composition jumps out to let me know that something else needs immediate discussion and revision.

It’s best to analyse a solid sample of writing from your class to determine where to start. Try not to focus on too many traits at once – just one or two will offer best bang for your buck!

Find the Writing Analysis document in the Writing Resources section of the website. It’s linked to NAPLAN requirements.

There are also a number of very simple rubrics to print off, too. They might help you to determine the focus for your whole-class lessons, or even for individual conferences. Again – just assess one-or-two of the traits. Any more than that, and you’ll get confused!

