

Abstract Title: Writing Workshop: Developing Lifelong Writers

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What are the actual criteria for good writing? Many teachers tend to have varying concepts about what makes a good writer. Since being literate means having the ability to both read and write- it is important to focus on writing as well as reading. There are many ways to help a student become a good writer. One proven way is through writing workshop, where students have the time to develop as writers. Students have the opportunity to write various genres while learning and implementing the 6+1 traits and writing process. These skills spread out to other curricula areas and develop writers for life.

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Asiyah (Terjuana) Teruel holds a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and a Masters of Education in Elementary Education. She is certified in both academic areas. This is her second year with the Universal School, in Buffalo, New York where she is currently a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom teacher. She is the present English Language Arts department chair. Her long term goal is to implement and maintain a balanced literacy curriculum at the school, using current best practices and research based data. Prior to teaching at the elementary level, she taught middle and high school Spanish for 7 years at an area public school.

Amira Agwa holds a Bachelor of Arts in Social Science Interdisciplinary degree concentrating in Early Childhood Education. She is pursuing her Masters degree in Elementary Education. She is the current 1<sup>st</sup> grade classroom teacher at the Universal School, in Buffalo, New York. This is her second year with the school. The previous year she co-taught the Pre-K class and developed a pre-literacy curriculum to align with the literacy program of the primary grades.

## Statement of Problem:

Many educators, in several curriculum areas, find it difficult to get their students to write well. Schools where many students speak English as a second language find it even more difficult to create students who produce quality writing. At all levels, teaching writing to students can seem like a feat. Assessing writing reliably, accurately, and objectively tends to become even more of a challenge. There are many reasons for this difficulty, some include: what teachers are looking for varies, old notions about what is important about writing may still be prevalent, and the concept of what makes good writing differ. Writing workshop is one of the best practices in writing which helps to alleviate these problems and discrepancies.

The perception of what is writing may differ yet alone that of what is good or quality writing. It appears that many teachers feel as though good writing is equal to accurate conventions of writing. Other teachers look for other descriptors of quality. These descriptors in the end may seem different but there is usually one underlying factor linking them. Educators need a way to uniformly evaluate student writing. A way is needed making assessment consistent through varying genres, curricula, and students.

Many older notions about writing, though useful, are now a subsidiary of what is considered the best practices according to research. One major factor seems to be the feeling that the appropriate use of conventions makes good writing. Conventions are important but stressing it may have a negative effect on a student and his/her writing abilities.

Teachers are different and as a result three teachers evaluating the same writing piece may have three different opinions about it. This difference of criteria becomes apparent as students move from one teacher to another (from grade to grade). If teachers stress different aspects of writing students will always have a hard time meeting the expectations of their new

teacher. The strain is in part due to the unknown expectations of the current “new” teacher, students may be trained in a particular part of writing and lacking in the one this teacher is looking for. In the end a common language is needed for students, teachers, and even parents. This common language will aid all involved in understanding what is expected, how to reach set goals, and how to be properly trained to become a good, strong writer- for life.

#### Review of Literature and Methods:

Currently, there is an abundance of research and resources about the “common language” teachers, students, and parents can use to bring together the aspects of quality writing. This “common language” is known as the 6+1 traits of writing. It is a model originally created in the early 1980’s by teachers in Beaverton, Oregon and Missoula, Montana (and other areas). Teachers noticed this need to have a uniform language. After evaluating many writing pieces and discussing what they wanted and looked for in students’ writing these teachers came up with recurring characteristics. They noticed that most criteria ended up falling into one of six (plus one) characteristics. They were: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, plus presentation. These attributes became the foundation of the 6+1 Trait model of writing assessment.

The traits and their terminology may be used to connect to important concepts found in literature, science, social studies, math, fine arts, and health. The Idea Trait is where the writer establishes a focus (or main event), uses support and elaboration that extends and develops the ideas presented, and uses relevant, specific, and sufficient details. Organization is important in more areas than writing. In the trait model it means that writing is well planned and has a sense of completeness. The internal structure of the piece is evident. There is an obvious beginning,

middle, and ending; as a result of this there is also a good sense of sequence. The use of transitional words helps this area. Voice is another important trait most teachers desire to see in writing. It is the evidence of the writer behind the message. Teachers should look for enthusiasm for writing; individuality, personality, and charm; the tailoring of communication to an audience; and writing that evokes an emotional response. Word choice tends to be an obstacle because once a student becomes comfortable with a certain word it is hard to get him or her to stray from its usage, unless taught how to. When analyzing word choice there should be evidence of precision in the use of words such as: concrete nouns, active verbs, and adjectives which create a vivid image. Teachers tend to look for an awareness of language, an understanding that there are different ways to say things, and the use of new words (at times more complex words) in writing. Sentence fluency is another trait many teachers check for in student's writing. It involves the rhythm and flow of the language, and how it sounds to the reader. Observed characteristics include sentence sense, an ear for language patterns, the use of more complex sentences, and a variety of sentence lengths. The convention trait is the last of the six. This is in part due to the fact that it appears toward the end of the writing process. It is part of the editing process. It is not recommended to focus on this trait too early in a student's writing as it may hinder the development of a strong writer. It is the mechanical correctness of the piece. In addition it emphasizes accurate spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage, paragraphing, and capitalization. The final trait, considered the plus one, is presentation. It is seen as the final piece and is not necessarily used all the time. In fact, it is the least frequently used because it comes after all other elements of writing have occurred. Things to consider in presentation include: having a product with a positive overall impression, is aesthetically pleasing, and enhances the ability for the reader to understand and connect with the message. NWREL,

Culham, and other educators suggest teaching, taking, and assessing these traits separately or grouped; both according to what it is that the teacher is looking for in that particular writing piece.

The 6+1 Trait model is not a writing curriculum, but it does allow students and teachers to communicate about qualities and criteria of writing. This point is stressed by Ruth Culham (2003), a renowned educator and proponent of the 6+1 Trait model. She has developed, simplified, and explained the traits. Her research has been extensive, as she is sometimes referred to as “the trait lady”. The traits help build an understanding of what good writing should look like. This is accomplished through the uniform language created by identifying each trait. Each trait has specific terminology explaining the characteristics of it. These traits are also linked to the various parts of the writing process.

The traits embody what makes good writing and what most teachers look for in writing. As students understand good writing traits they slowly create texts (writing) meeting those criteria. It is a model used for both assessing and enhancing writing.

These traits have also helped “set the criteria for the qualities of good writing at various grade levels and levels of achievement” (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory). The 6+1 Trait model may be used by teachers in any curricula area. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory created rubrics for the traits and continue to create materials and uphold the work began by the originating teachers.

Ruth Culham provides vivid details and ideas on how to introduce the 6+1 Trait model beginning in kindergarten on through the upper grades. She explains the connection between the traits and the writing process, the need to have a writing curriculum, and the importance of understanding that the traits alone are not going to create quality writers in both her books

entitled, *6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for Grades 3 and Up* (2003) and *6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for the Primary Grades* (2005). One well supported and utilized method of helped to generate good, strong writers is the writing workshop.

In order for anyone to become proficient and fluent at anything consistent practice is needed. Writing workshop is one way this can be accomplished. “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.” (Culham, 2003). The writing workshop is a comprehensive writing time for students to practice different forms of writing genres as well as learn and develop skills and strategies to become more effective writers. Topics may be guided or selected by the student as long as it adheres to the specified genre of study. Topics may also be interdisciplinary. It is the opportunity for students to think, write, reflect, discuss, revise, edit, and collaborate. Students have the chance to engage in authentic writing often; it should occur at least four times a week. The frequency of writing workshop helps a student’s fluency.

Recommendations of practical implementation:

Getting started with writing workshop requires reflection on your feelings about writing, what is important to you, and what topics or genres you need or want to cover. A useful guide to starting is the book by Antoinette Cerulli Fornshell entitled *Planning for Successful Reading and Writing in K-2* (2003). Units of study for writing workshop should focus on a particular genre or strategy. The other elements of writing are components of the main focus. Fornshell (2003) states that “students engage in writing a variety of texts on topics of their choice, with the teacher guiding the process by modeling, providing focus lessons, conferring, and giving them

opportunities to share”. A typical writing workshop block would look like the following: a mini-lesson on a grammar point, writing technique, trait, skill, or strategy; writing that focuses on the presented mini-lesson; and time to share what was written (by group or conferencing).

There are many genres, strategies, skills, and topics to consider when deciding what to teach to students. Mini-lessons are where the teacher presents and models a particular writing aspect s/he wants the class to utilize. Possible mini-lessons, which may be combined, are:

### **Introduction**

- rules
- expectations
- individual feelings about writing
- introducing and organizing the notebook/folder
- reasons why people write

### **Grammar**

- parts of a sentence
- parts of speech (as appropriate per grade level)
- conventions
- spacing words

### **Writing Genres**

- memoir
- narrative
- expository
- descriptive

- creative
- poetry
- letter writing
- articles
- concept books
- journals

### **Skills, Strategies, and Studies**

- picture book study
- author study (to see writing style)
- craft (descriptive language, parts of a story)

### **Writing Process**

- getting started (prewriting and drafting)
- revision
- editing
- proofreading

### **Writing Traits**

- ideas, focus, details
- organization
- voice
- word choice
- sentence fluency
- presentation.

It is important to remember that not every assignment needs to be assessed. As long as the terminology is being used students are learning about writing. Students may be grouped at times according to their writing needs; these groupings should also be flexible.

Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (2005) identify what developing writers do in their book *Guiding Readers and Writers, Grades 3-6*. These indicators are also relevant for the lower and older grades. Characteristics of strong writers include: use writing as a tool for thinking, write often, have and use skills to craft and revise writing, observe the world closely, use writing for a variety of purposes, enjoy writing, have a sense of themselves as writers, take risks, read as writers, noticing techniques and styles, have an awareness of audience and different genres, draw on literary knowledge as a resource for their writing, and are confident in their writing skills and abilities. Teachers should reflect on their current practices in connection with those characteristics. It is also important to have proper materials for implementing writing workshop.

A writing workshop classroom will contain environmental posters and reference charts (word walls, grammar points, phonemic awareness, writing tips) should be around the room for students to see to promote independence up, a writing notebook, other pads, pencils, markers, pens, stickers, a folder, and reference books. Writing supplies should be in a centrally located area or on each table for small groups to share. You may also consider maintaining writing portfolios.

Through providing constant chances for students to write helps create good, strong writers. It The use of a common language allows for uniformity as students move through the grades. This makes it easier for teachers, students, and parents to know what is expected; and in turn to meet and perhaps surpass those expectations. Other curriculum areas using this language helps to amplify the success of the writing curriculum therefore generating lifelong writers.

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