

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

October 2004 | Volume 62 | Number 2

Writing! Pages 53-56

Growing Beyond Grades

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Provide a Common Language: The Six Traits Model

A common understanding of terms used to describe elements of writing is necessary for teachers to teach and for students to truthfully evaluate their own writing. Lack of a common language can slow writers' progress. Too often, weeks after the new school year begins on a note of hope, a frustrated teacher stands before her students and realizes that they do not understand her lessons. This realization may usher in several weeks to an entire semester of reteaching. Sometimes this reteaching is redundant: Students *do* understand the concept being taught but seem ignorant because they are unfamiliar with the terms that their teacher uses.

For example, a teacher who had been trying to introduce journalistic writing to her 10th graders had been using the term *lead*. She took for granted that her class knew what a lead was. She soon saw, however, that many of her students' leads resembled the beginnings of short stories but then broke off abruptly into factual reporting. After reteaching the concept for a week, she realized that confusion about terms was still a problem when a student raised her hand and said, "So what you want is a *hook*?" The students could grasp the difference between the kinds of openings appropriate for fiction and for news articles but misunderstood what to call various types of openers.

We have yet to find a teaching approach that addresses the need for a common language about quality writing better than the Six Traits of Writing model. A group of teachers who believed in giving students an active role in assessing their own writing developed the Six Traits model in the 1980s (Jarmer, Kozol, Nelson, & Salsberry, 2000). These instructors intensively analyzed hundreds of student writing samples from all grade levels and generated a list of elements common to all the pieces they considered excellent:

- Ideas (details, development, focus);
- Organization (internal structure);
- Voice (tone and attention to audience);
- Word choice (precise language and phrasing);
- Sentence fluency (correctness, rhythm, and cadence); and
- Conventions (mechanical correctness).

In classes using the Six Traits approach, students learn to recognize these traits in strong writing before they consciously use them in a piece of their own. Teachers and students at Jennie Wilson Elementary School in Garden City, Kansas, which participated in a study on the effectiveness of the six traits, discovered the power of this common language. Jarmer and other researchers who conducted the study noted that

Using the language of the traits, beginning in kindergarten [and building on each trait throughout the next five years], gave students the opportunity to "talk" about writing. This talk was extremely important and eventually became a part of their writing vocabulary, just

like hypothesis and data were important words in a science experiment. (Jarmer et al., 2000, p. 3)

The Six Traits method recommends that teachers or students judge each element of a piece of writing as the writing progresses rather than give one overall grade on a finished piece. This approach shows students that all writing, even a finished draft, remains in progress, and that a piece may be excellent in one area but need significant work in another. Teachers at Jennie Wilson gave students the responsibility of evaluating their own work. They asked students to defend their scores by showing how specific qualities in their writing reflected each trait. This requirement forced students to scrutinize their writing and helped them build on strengths and learn from shortcomings more than a straight letter grade ever would have