

Strategy 1

Introduce the Language of the Traits

Using a student-friendly scoring guide, teach the language students need to speak and think like writers:

- Let students hear good writing
- Examine the qualities of good writing
- Create your own student-friendly scoring guides

Assessment—Isn't That a Strange Place To Begin?

Actually, no. By reading, discussing, and assessing pieces of writing, students internalize what strong ideas, sound organization, powerful voice, and so forth are all about.

The need to review, reflect, and discuss introduces students to the concept of being critics. This is a role they really enjoy—they are used to being the evaluated, not the evaluator! Though students love to read and score writing, they quickly find out that reviewing someone else's work and making suggestions for change are complex tasks. Students must analyze a piece of writing, evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, then predict how it would be different if certain proposed changes were made. This is difficult, but it's how students begin to see themselves as writers: reflecting, discussing, practicing scoring anonymous work, and then assessing their own and each other's work.

Even before we begin using the traits with students, it is vital to help them understand the need for the common language of the traits and appreciate the shared vision we all work toward that defines “good” writing. Strategy 1 provides this foundation. There are many, many ways to introduce the notion of analytic traits to students. You may use the activities proposed in this section or you may have other ones in mind. Just as in writing, there is no one right way. Remember, too, that even students who have had some exposure to the traits will need a refresher.

If your students are experienced, you won't want to go through a basic introduction to the traits, but you will want to review. After all, you will have new students, changes to your language arts curriculum, or some students who are ready to “get it” for the first time. Here are some ideas for a review:

- Ask students in small groups to make posters and present key features of their assigned trait back to the larger group. (Don't forget to give them scoring guides from which to work.)
- Use a poem on the 6+1 traits to create a choral reading that reviews the traits. Be sure to let the kids have lots of chances to practice by adding motions or sound effects to enhance the presentations.
- Go around the room and ask students to call off one thing from the scoring guide on each trait (one at a time) that they think is important to make a paper work in that area. (Again, make sure they have a guide in front of them!)
- Randomly call out descriptors yourself and ask students to respond by naming the trait each goes with. You can get really tricky with this one!

Good, Better, Best: Thinking Up Criteria

Begin with creating comfort with the notion of scoring guides or rubrics, criteria, and evaluations. You can even use topics that don't relate to writing or even to academics. How about the qualities of a clean room? How to make the most delicious pizza in the world? What it takes to be a best friend? What makes a good teacher? How we should enter the classroom in an orderly fashion?

The truth is, we are constantly evaluating. We decide whether we think something is good or bad, right or wrong based on criteria we've worked out for ourselves. We rarely write down those criteria and make them public. Even more rarely do we take the time to describe the different levels of “good” in our criteria—from great, to OK, to not so good at all. So, try building some criteria with your students—and pick something interesting that you think will be of use to you and to them all year long. This exercise can be fun and enlightening: You're able to talk about the value of criteria in a nonthreatening way.

Here are some examples. You'll note that the terms “rubric” and “scoring guide” are used interchangeably. Both refer to the specific criteria and indicators used when assessing student work.

Rubric for Whining

Score	Purpose	Audience	Quality
6	<p>The purpose of the whine is to get a group response. The target of the whine responds immediately to the full intention of the whine.</p> <p>The whine may have multiple purposes or targets.</p>	<p>There is full audience participation.</p> <p>Your audience extends beyond the boundaries of the initial whine.</p>	<p>The whine was seemingly endless, possibly carrying on for days.</p> <p>The pitch of the whine oscillated through the entire frequency range, beyond human hearing, causing neighborhood dogs to howl.</p> <p>Full volume, audible over a jet engine at full throttle.</p>
5	<p>The purpose of the whine is clear.</p> <p>There is a clear target for the whine.</p> <p>The goal of the whine is achieved.</p>	<p>Everybody in the area noticed your whine.</p> <p>Many people participated in your whine.</p>	<p>Duration of the whine is enough to engage audience.</p> <p>The pitch is high, like fingernails on a chalkboard.</p> <p>The whine is audible over classroom noise.</p>
4	<p>There is a purpose for the whine.</p> <p>The whine achieves its goal from the target through sympathy, guilt, or frustration.</p>	<p>Most of the people turned to hear you whine.</p> <p>Some people joined your whine.</p>	<p>The whine lasts five seconds or more.</p> <p>The pitch of the whine varies.</p> <p>The whine can be heard over the teacher's voice.</p>
3	<p>There is a purpose for the whine, but it failed to achieve its goal.</p> <p>The whine may establish some sympathy for the whiner.</p>	<p>Your whine was noticed by some people.</p> <p>One or two people joined your whine.</p>	<p>The whine is heard but fades out.</p> <p>The pitch is flat and lifeless.</p>
2	<p>The whine doesn't seem to have a purpose.</p> <p>The whine gets little attention from the target.</p>	<p>A few people joined your whine, but nobody really paid attention to it.</p>	<p>The whine is barely audible.</p>
1	<p>There is no purpose for the whine.</p> <p>The whine is not directed at a target.</p>	<p>Nobody noticed, nobody cared.</p>	<p>The whine is little more than a whimper.</p>

Rubric for When We Have a Substitute

5 The class's behavior was so wonderful that the substitute would be tickled and delighted to come back to our classroom to substitute again. The students (with maybe one or two exceptions):

- Lined up and entered quietly; went directly to seats (unless they needed to quickly and quietly get a drink or sharpen a pencil).
- Had needed materials out and ready.
- Looked at the speaker, especially the teacher when s/he was teaching.
- Were quiet, polite, and responsible in dealing with the teacher AND one another.
- Used class time wisely.
- Might have even EXCEEDED your expectations.

3 The class's behavior was average. Some times were better than others. More than a few students needed reminders.

- The students may have lined up and entered noisily, but quieted down after entering the classroom or being reminded once.
- Most had materials ready; some did not.
- More than a few students needed reminders to stop talking when they should have been listening.
- Some students wasted class time or needed reminders to get back on track.
- The class's behavior met or exceeded your minimal expectations.

1 The class's behavior was so horrid that the substitute would be delighted to NEVER come back to our classroom.

- Lining up and entering the room was noisy and chaotic.
- Few students had materials out and ready.
- Many students were noisy or inattentive when the teacher was teaching.
- There were many incidents of students being loud, rude, and/or irresponsible.
- Very few students used class time wisely.
- The class's behavior fell far below your minimal expectations.

Mrs. White's Rubric for Turning in an Assignment

5	<p>The assignment is arranged by exceptional standards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The handwriting is ALWAYS appropriately spaced.• My mistakes are constantly erased.• The words or mathematical problems are continually written in appropriate third-grade size (college ruled paper).• The heading has all three components: name, date, and subject.• The paper is spotlessly clean!• The paper is doodle-free.
3	<p>The assignment is arranged by average standards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The handwriting is spaced appropriately; however, periodically there is some crowding of words.• My mistakes are erased most of the time.• The words and/or mathematical problems are not too small or too big, 80 percent of the time.• My name is on my paper, but the date and/or subject are missing.• The paper is fairly clean, unripped, crumple-free, and stain-free.• Most of the time the paper is doodle-free.
1	<p>The assignment is so unreadable or missing that the teacher is going to go ballistic.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The handwriting is sloppy, squashed together and/or too far apart, too small or large.• My mistakes have not been erased well.• There is no name or proper heading on the paper.• The paper is wet, dirty, ripped, and/or wrinkled.• The paper has food or beverage stains on it.• The paper has more doodling than the assignment.

Moving On

Once you've broken the "criteria ice," you can take some steps toward the trait writing model. Ask your students: "What do you think makes good writing?" Record their responses. Their ideas will be varied, often surprising, and usually reflective of what students think teachers are looking for in their writing.

Now take the list (probably very conventions-centered since that is familiar and safe for them) and ask them to think about writing in a different way. Read aloud rich text and then ask what makes good writing. Getting to the good stuff takes time, and students need a chance to seriously reflect on what else is present in good writing other than the obvious.

Turn the creation of a scoring guide into a group activity:

- Divide the class into seven groups with each one assigned a different trait
- Ask the groups to brainstorm ways to describe their trait and present their work in a poster
- Hang the posters in the classroom so students are reminded what they and their peers think are the most important qualities of each trait

- Use this activity to validate how much students already know about good writing: They might surprise themselves and you

Here's one example of a scoring guide generated by students in their own language:

Student-Created Version of 6+1 Trait Writing Scoring Guide

SOUND IDEAS

- It all makes sense.
- I know this topic well.
- I have included the most interesting details.
- My paper has a purpose.
- Once you start reading, you will not want to stop.

GOOD ORGANIZATION

- My beginning will interest the reader.
- Everything ties together.
- It builds to the good parts.
- You can follow it easily.
- At the end it feels finished and makes you think.

INDIVIDUAL VOICE

- This really sounds like me.
- I've been honest and written what I think and feel.
- Can you feel my commitment to this topic?
- I want you to experience my writing with me.
- I know why I'm writing and who my audience is.
- I bet you'll want to read this to someone.

POWERFUL WORDS

- This is the best way to say this.
- My words create mind pictures.
- I've tried new ways to say everyday things.
- Listen to the power in my verbs.
- Some of the words and phrases linger in your mind.

SMOOTH FLUENCY

- My sentences begin in different ways.
- Some sentences are short and some are long.
- It just sounds good as I read it aloud—it flows.
- My sentences have power and punch.
- I have “sentence sense.”

CORRECT CONVENTIONS

- I don’t have many mistakes in my paper.
- I have used capitals correctly.
- Periods, commas, exclamation marks, and quotation marks are in the right places.
- Almost every word is spelled correctly.
- I remembered to indent each paragraph.
- It would not take long to get this ready to share.

APPEALING PRESENTATION

- My layout makes my piece easy to read.
- I’ve used the right amount of white space.
- There aren’t too many fonts.
- My headings help the reader find information.
- Maps and pictures add to my paper.

Steps to Deconstructing Good Writing

1. Develop some user-friendly criteria so students understand how they can describe different levels of performance on an endless list of things that are important to them. (See the examples of when we have a substitute, turning in an assignment, or whining.)
2. Now, we want to apply this same kind of thinking to writing. Ask students to suggest ideas of what makes good writing. Record these, so students can look at them and think about them as you continue. By the way, this makes a marvelous bulletin board that you can leave up the entire year, adding to it as students expand their trait understanding and language.
3. Read different text selections that emphasize some of the traits they didn't mention in their first brainstorm. For example, if you get lists where no one mentions voice or word choice, you may wish to pick reading selections that are clearly strong in those characteristics, such as *The Twits* by Roald Dahl or Bruce Brook's wonderful opening to the chapter titled "Killing" in his nature book *Predator*.

You will find your own favorites and they should be chosen to match the needs of your brainstorm activity and the age level of your students. Read snippets of text that help students realize good writing is more than conventions, and urge them to keep adding to their brainstorm. You can stop when there is at least ONE item on their list that is a good, clear match to every trait.

4. Hand the students a list of qualities teachers look for in good writing. (You can find some examples on page 64 in the Appendix. It's interesting to note how closely the items on this list correspond to the traits—even though these responses came from teachers who had not yet studied trait writing.) With colored markers, have them mark each item on their brainstorm that also shows up on the teachers' list. Surprise—every item on their list should be checked off. This is how we establish ownership of the traits by the students.
5. Now, give students their own student-friendly scoring guide that they can keep throughout their school career and even take home. (See Appendix, p. 70.) Don't be too surprised if they are somewhat blown away by the idea that they might be held responsible for a lot more than conventions. It's truly overwhelming for students and adults alike to first realize that they have to become masters of ALL the traits before they can be good writers.

Good news: Let the kids know you will be working with one trait at a time. This should be a relief to them and to you! Remember, we teach writing, not just the traits. As we examine and learn about one trait at a time, we fold it into the bigger picture and create the opportunity for students to learn about writing in a meaningful way.