

6 +1 Traits of Writing

Carol von Gunten, Teaching Principal, Sylvan Meadows Adventist School, Sylvan Lake, AB

On January 15 & 16, 2008, I attended a 6 +1 Traits of Writing workshop for two days in Edmonton with Lynda Rice. The workshop itself was an absolute wealth of information, techniques and activities all laid out together in a very stimulating and practical way. It was an exceptional presentation!

The workshop materials were a treasure house of materials and resources. I especially like the rubrics which are user friendly for students and can be used at all levels! The same rubrics are used by the teacher for scoring the final paper. Once taught the writing process and how to use the rubrics, any student can mark his own paper against it, and know exactly what is in need of revision and what to do to obtain the highest score. Lynda refuses to tell them what mark she would arrive at on their piece as it takes the responsibility from them for their own revisions.

I came away from this workshop with something I was never able to get a handle on before, a graduated method for teaching writing. It's like the feeling of finally putting the pieces of a puzzle together. This lack of a method to produce a piece leaves many writers feeling inadequate and unable to begin. With the proper tools, even the youngest writer using these rubrics will be able to produce a quality piece without surprises or arguments about scores!

There were five steps Lynda always used with teaching every trait. She began with a strong definition, a quote, strong examples, "activities, activities, activities", then practiced anonymous scoring of samples from previous students with her class.

A strong definition identifies the trait. For example, Ideas is the "heart of the message" and looks for clarity, focus and quality details. Definitions can be found in the dictionary.

Quotes focused on the particular trait being taught and she suggested several sources to tap, such as the Reader's Digest "Quotable Quotes" section, cereal boxes, and cards, books, and signs. She is always watching for quotes and carries a notebook to record them. My favorite was a quote by Robert Frost used for teaching voice. "No tears in the writer-no tears in the reader". There was also a quote used for conventions that brought a chuckle from the audience of teachers, "No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else's draft." H.G.Wells

Strong examples were found in books that emphasized an easily identifiable trait. For a conventions example, a book by Kate Lum was used, "What! Cried Granny". This was a story of a grandchild staying overnight with grandma, and using one excuse after the other to keep from having to go to bed. His last excuse was, "But Grandma, it's almost morning!"

Activities, Activities, Activities!!!! Practice, practice, practice! Like hockey or any other team sport, getting ready for participation takes maximum effort. A team doesn't play a game the first time they get together. They practice until they think they are ready to take on the challenge of another team. After the game, the coach uses their moves to help teach corrections to better their playing and chance to win next time. It is the same with writing, (and don't tell her students this) but Lynda doesn't record grades during the practice writing sessions.

An excellent activity for practicing sentence fluency and visibly seeing if the writer was alternating sentence length was to cut the sentences of a piece out of different colors of construction paper. The strips could be moved around to change the variety of a sentence many ways without having to write and erase before gluing them permanently.

Anonymous samples were marked using an overhead and colored markers. Only one trait was marked at first, then each additional trait as it was taught. Each trait was marked using a different color. This really worked well, as the class could immediately see which ones emphasized the trait and which areas did not. Use strong and weak samples while scoring to give the students practice in discriminating where pieces needed revising.

A short summary of the teaching outline is as follows: introduce the traits, teach one trait at a time in order: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency and conventions, assign a writing piece which is revised using the rubric, then the teacher scores the final piece using the same rubric the student used. Over the nine months of the school year, the traits are taught in order, and each time a new trait is added, the old is reviewed. Each trait takes approximately 5-6 weeks to teach.

I would highly recommend looking into the 6+1 Traits materials. Just google 6+1 Trait Writing and find a site called NW Regional Educational Laboratory ASSESSMENT. The site reads “a powerful way to assess student writing while improving writing skills and clarifying instruction...” Take a look today!