

Research on Writing with the 6+1 Traits

By
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The notion is widespread that children must learn to read before they can write. However, Bissex (1980), Chomsky (1971) and Graves (1983) found that young children begin writing as or even before they learn to read, because they have a need to communicate ideas and concepts that have been discovered by experience rather than in books. And this communication serves not only to share thoughts, but also to help organize them into coherent categories.

Research has confirmed the importance of process in writing, and that what writers do as they write is at least as important as the products they produce (Tompkins 1993). Britton (1970), Emig (1971) and Graves (1975) investigated the thinking processes that young writers used as they wrote. They found that the process consisted of three basic activities: conception or prewriting, incubation or composing, and production or postwriting. Flowers and Hayes (1977,1981) found these same basic stages, and added that the process is recursive, with writers moving between steps in the process freely. Sommers (1980, 1982) described writing as a revision process in which ideas are developed, and pointed to the limitations placed on student thinking when teachers focus on mechanics rather than content.

Early research into the process of writing was brought to a head in 1972 with the Bay Area Writing Project that later became the National Writing Project. But while the writing process developed by the Project provided teachers with a framework within which to work, it did not give the detailed description of what makes good writing. Paul Diederich's work at the Educational Testing Service remained the only description of writing quality criteria until 1984 when Beaverton School District in Oregon began a study that eventually led to the development of the Six Traits of Writing.

Diederich, French and Carlton (1961) in a paper presented to the National Council of Teachers of English described a factor-analytic study of the reasons teachers gave for their grades on written compositions, along with a set of eight scales developed from the study by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). Their scales were named: ideas, organization, wording, flavor, usage, punctuation, spelling, and handwriting.

This paper along with his later article titled 'How to Measure Growth in Writing Ability' (1966), are the earliest systematic attempts to move the educational community away from holistic writing scoring towards an analytic, trait-based model.

Grundy (1986) in a bulletin published by the Oregon School Study Council describes the development of the Beaverton School District's writing program that uses a 'process approach' to writing. A result of this change was the increasing awareness of the need for an analytic assessment tool to gauge the success of the new writing instructional model. In 1983, a committee facilitated by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory reviewed a range of assessment models and finally proposed a six-trait model that included: ideas/content; organization and development; voice/tone/flavor; effective word choice; syntax/sentence structure; and writing conventions. The district produced a scoring guide for each of the traits containing descriptors of papers scoring 5, 3 or 1 on a five point scale. The Beaverton model was chosen by the Oregon Department of Education for the 1985 Oregon Statewide Writing Assessment (see report: Oregon 1985 Assessment, Writing; Oregon Department of Education).



A watershed of writing research came in 1986 with the publication by **George Hillocks** (1987) of his meta-analysis of twenty years of research. He reviewed 2000 studies on the process of composing writing to produce a list of six instructional methods commonly adopted as curriculum or program focuses. Based on meta-analysis techniques developed by Glass (1978), he compared the effectiveness of instructional strategies across studies to create a comparison coded for a variety of variables.

The six instructional strategies are: grammar, meaning the teaching of parts of speech and parsing (diagramming) of sentences; models, being the presentation of good pieces of writing showing particular structures or modes; sentence combining, meaning the practice of building complex sentences from simpler examples; scales, which is the training of students to use sets of criteria with which to judge the quality of their work (e.g. traits); inquiry, focused on the use of data and information that students then ‘transform’ into generalizations and arguments for writing tasks; and free writing, which is the technique of having students write freely about whatever interests them.

The **scales** focus has an effect on writing quality (**0.36**) that is second only to ‘inquiry’. The scales method, of which the 6+1 Traits model is an example, employs sets of criteria to evaluate pieces of work. Students are taught to apply the criteria to compositions of varying levels of quality until they can competently review and revise their own work

In 1992, **Arter, Spandel, Culham, and Pollard** (1994) conducted the study that remains the most specific in the measurement of the effectiveness of the traits. They carried out a project that involved six classrooms of fifth grade students, representing a range of learning environments (rural/urban, size, socio-economic). Classrooms were randomly assigned to a ‘treatment’ group (67 students) provided training in the Traits, or a ‘control’ group (65 students).

Results for the treatment group showed substantial growth in mean scores (0.55-0.87 on a 5 point scale) in the three traits that were taught directly, with small to moderate growth (0.19-0.53) being shown in the untaught traits. Control groups showed small growth (0-0.21) in all six of the traits.

Coe (1999) conducted a study of 938 papers scored by two teams of raters in order to determine the relationship of ‘Six-Trait’ and ‘Holistic’ Assessments. The investigation showed that each of the six traits was strongly predictive of passing the Washington Assessment of Student Learning in writing (scored holistically), with Ideas, Conventions, and Sentence Fluency being more strongly predictive (75% of the time) than were Organization, Word Choice, and Voice (70% of the time). A model using the sum of the six trait scores as a predictor of success was accurate for 79% of students.

Coe pointed to the advantage of using the 6-Trait model to diagnose specific strengths and weaknesses of student writing in order to inform instruction and improve overall writing in the classroom.

There have been a number of other small-scale studies that point to the effectiveness of the 6+1 Writing Trait model. Each was conducted at a single school or district and generally involved one grade level of students. The studies all used a similar methodology, namely pre- and post-trait training scores with growth data derived from the differential. With the exception of Kent School District, all studies are single year:

1. **Jennie Wilson Elementary** (Jarmer et al; 2000): this was a report in the Journal of School Improvement. The school conducted a pretest of student writing skills then taught the 6 Trait



model as an intervention. They reported improvement in all grade levels K-5th ranging from 40% to 92%.

2. **Kent School District, WA** (NWREL, 2000): quoted in NWREL training materials. The study tracked student growth in writing achievement in third grade over a period of three years, with Trait training taking place in the second year. The study showed an increase in the number of students meeting benchmark standards in all traits, ranging from 8.6% to 32.2%.
3. **Pilot SAS Writing Assessment** (NWREL, 2000): a single-year study of fourth grade student pre-trait and post-trait training, showing a growth in the percentage meeting the scoring criteria of 12%.
4. **Hartly Elementary School** (NWREL, 2000): a single school study of third grade students giving pre- and post trait comparison. The study shows positive growth in average scores in all traits, ranging from 1.79 to 2.09 on a 5-point scale.
5. **The Saudi Arabia/ARAMCO School** (NWREL, 2000): a single school study of fourth grade students, showing the percentage of students at each level of performance pre- and post trait implementation. The study shows an increase of 7% in the number of students meeting or exceeding the district writing standard.

In addition, a major study is currently being conducted by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory to accurately measure the effectiveness of the model.

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