

Write Traits® 6-Trait Instruction and Assessment Professional Development

R e s e a r c h B a s e

All teachers can benefit from professional development to help them effectively teach writing.

Teacher quality is one of the most important factors influencing student achievement and it can be improved by education, certification, and professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2000). “The art of teaching is the art of continuing to learn. Teachers are the most important learners in the classroom” (Graves, 1994). Despite the evidence that teaching strategies and teacher knowledge have a direct impact on what students learn, “a surprising number of teachers have not been fully prepared in the subject areas they teach, an even greater number have not had adequate preparation in teaching strategies and methods” (Darling-Hammond, 1997). In a study funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement on teacher quality and student achievement, the findings “suggest that states interested in improving student achievement may be well-advised to attend, at least in part, to the preparation and qualifications of the teachers they hire and retain in the profession. It stands to reason that student learning should be enhanced by the efforts of teachers who are more knowledgeable in their field and are skillful at teaching it to others” (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges recommends “that state and local educational agencies provide comprehensive professional development for all teachers to help improve classroom practice” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003). Write Traits workshops provide educators with the skills, practice, and materials they need to teach and assess writing by implementing the six traits writing model in their classroom. “Statewide policy and standards should require that teacher preparation programs provide all prospective teachers with exposure to writing theory and practice. State and local educational leaders should also provide support for multiple workshops and other opportunities that encourage teachers already in the classroom to upgrade their writing skills and competence as writing teachers” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003).

Professional development that is linked to content is more powerful and beneficial for both teachers and students. A number of studies relating teacher professional development to student outcomes “suggest that when professional development is focused on academic content and curriculum that is aligned with standards-based reform, teaching practice and student achievement are likely to improve” (Whitehurst, 2003). Write Traits workshops focus on teaching and assessing writing. During the training, participants practice what they’ve learned by assessing student writing and sharing their assessments.

Common writing assessment across grade levels and curriculum areas is essential for effective teaching and learning of writing skills.

“Common expectations about writing should be developed across disciplines through in-service workshops designed to help teachers understand good writing and develop as writers themselves” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003). Write Traits workshops introduce participants to the effective, teacher-developed 6-trait writing model and teach educators to both teach and assess writing using the 6-trait model. “Writing assessment is a genuine challenge . . . [and] assessment systems have an important role to play in the improvement of the teaching and learning of writing. While individual students need to know their strengths and weaknesses, their teachers also need to understand when students are writing effectively and when they are experiencing difficulty. With new rubrics and other evaluation guides for teachers, considerable progress has been made in recent years toward improving the writing evaluation in the classroom” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003).

The development of the six traits of effective writing as a framework for writing assessment is based on the independent research of teachers in the Beaverton and Portland, Oregon public schools and was influenced by the research of Paul Diederich (1974), Donald Murray (1982), and Alan Purves (1992). The six traits offer an assessment model that is meaningful and effective because it is aligned with the learning goal of producing better writing (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Stiggins, 1996; Strickland & Strickland, 1998). The six traits of good writing are ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions (Spandel, 2001). Write Traits workshops teach the traits in the context of teaching writing.

Six-trait assessment and instruction “help students take charge of their own writing process; understand the difference between strong and weak writing—and use that knowledge to write stronger drafts; [and] revise and edit their own writing because they can ‘read’ it and know what to do to make it better” (Spandel, 2001). In addition to providing common writing assessment across grade levels and curriculum areas, the six traits provides teachers and students with a common vocabulary to discuss writing. “How different writing instruction—and assessment—can be when teachers of writing and their students share a common vocabulary that allows them to think, speak, assess, and plan like writers” (Spandel, 2001).

Teaching writing across the curriculum helps students learn in all subject areas.

The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges urges state and local education agencies to greatly increase the amount of time students spend writing. This goal can be accomplished by encouraging writing across the curriculum. “Writing is everyone’s business, and state and local curriculum guidelines should require writing in every curriculum area and at all grade levels” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003). Write Traits training is ideal for teachers of all subject areas who want to improve student writing across the curriculum. The writing strategies and assessment guidelines teachers learn during a Write Traits workshop can be applied to their teaching and assessing of writing in all subject areas. “We strongly endorse writing across the curriculum. The concept of doubling writing time is feasible because of the near-total neglect of writing outside English departments. In history, foreign languages, mathematics, home economics, science, physical education, art, and social science, all students can be encouraged to write more—and to write more effectively” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003).

Writing is an essential learning tool in all subject areas. “If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003). The six traits writing model teaches writing as a process—prewriting, writing, revising, editing, and publishing. By following these steps, students not only improve their writing, but also increase their understanding of the subject matter. “Writing is not simply a way for students to demonstrate what they know. It is a way to help them understand what they know. At its best, writing is learning” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003).

Write Traits workshops train teachers not only how to teach writing, but also how to teach students to assess and improve their own writing. “Assessment must promote learning, not just measure it. That is, when learners are well served, assessment becomes a learning experience that supports and improves instructions” (Routman, 2000). Workshop participants learn how to use the six traits to establish specific writing and assessment guidelines in their classroom. “Explicit criteria simplify both teaching and learning by making the goals of writing clear and by laying out for students precisely what they must do to succeed” (Spandel, 2001).

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