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# A writing instruction tool for Valley High School, West Des Moines, Iowa

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## Recommended Citation

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## Abstract

As computer-based communication becomes increasingly popular, so does the need for effective and efficient writing skills. Individuals must express themselves formally and informally to others through writing; thus, the importance of writing goes beyond scholarly pursuits and pervades every facet of society today.

The focus of this paper is to examine the usefulness of a common evaluative and instructive language, specifically the *Six-Trait Analytical Scoring Guide* (developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Oregon), within a high school in order to encourage growth and success in student writing.

# A Writing Instruction Tool for

# Valley High School, West Des Moines, Iowa

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MAE: Educational Psychology

Final Project

10 October 2002

This Research Paper by:    Kristine Milburn

Entitled:              A Writing Instruction Tool for
                       Valley High School, West Des Moines, Iowa


Has been approved as meeting the
research paper requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts in Education
Educational Psychology: Professional Development for Teachers


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11-11-02
Date Approved

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*Writing is not superficial to the intellectual life but central to it; writing is one of the most disciplined ways of making meaning and one of the most effective methods we can use to monitor our own thinking.*

Donald M. Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing, 2nd ed.*

# CHAPTER I

**Introduction**

As computer-based communication becomes increasingly popular, so does the need for effective and efficient writing skills. Individuals must express themselves formally and informally to others through writing; thus, the importance of writing goes beyond scholarly pursuits and pervades every facet of society today. In order for students to experience personal, social, and professional advancement throughout life, they need not only constant and consistent practice of skillful, written communication but also adequate feedback so that they can improve their writing skills. Schools already recognize the importance of writing instruction; however, schools still struggle with methodology and assessment. Various modes and genres of writing occur in every discipline; and each discipline, mode, and genre has its own set of writing rules and standards. Students find it difficult to navigate the assortment of expectations let alone to sharpen their own writing skills. With this in mind, English educators need to communicate effectively with each other to employ a common evaluative set of language and criteria which students recognize. An analytic scale using common evaluative language can provide students with feedback necessary to improve their writing. The focus of this paper is to examine the usefulness of a common evaluative and instructive language, specifically the *Six-Trait Analytical Scoring Guide* (developed

by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Oregon), within a high school in order to encourage growth and success in student writing.

**Statement of the Problem**

As an English teacher in a large, suburban high school, this author regularly hears the frustrations of parents, teachers, and community members as they express concern over the perceived lack of writing skills displayed by high school students. Generally, complaints include students' inability to organize their thoughts, to express themselves succinctly or concisely, and to follow standard conventions of writing. In addition, teachers of other disciplines frequently refer to their students' inability to identify a specific purpose for their writing. These grievances are not specific to any single school; many English teachers hear similar complaints throughout the school year. Marie Jean Lederman, director of CUNY's Freshman Skills Assessment Program and Instructional Resource Center, concurs: "Teachers [outside the English department] say that students do not know how to isolate and stick to an idea, develop that idea, and illustrate it with specific examples" (41). Yet, many writing or composition textbooks and most English teachers across the nation focus on these very skills. Thus, teachers begin to wonder whether students truly lack the writing skills to complete the assigned tasks within the realm of the teacher's expectations or whether students lack appropriate practice and evaluation needed to reinforce writing skills.

Often English teachers fail to communicate writing expectations in a way that students recognize and understand. In addition, many teachers may become sidetracked by too many grammatical and mechanical errors. As a result, these teachers will give lower grades to students who have misunderstood the purpose and

audience of the writing assignment. Grammar and mechanics are certainly important in effective writing, and all teachers should help students understand the importance of accurate expression and provide assistance to correct such problems. At the same time, teachers must also look at other aspects of good writing such as content, organization, voice, sentence fluency, word choice, and conventions (grammar and mechanics). Evaluating individual traits of good writing will help students identify and work on weaknesses.

After fielding numerous complaints about students' writing skills, many school districts turn to standardized multiple-choice tests to evaluate their students' ability to write, which may or may not accurately reflect individual student ability. Even colleges rely on standardized tests such as the ACT and the SAT to determine students' intelligence and readiness for higher education. Though both the ACT and the SAT evaluate students' knowledge of standard English expression and conventions, neither evaluates students' actual writing ability. Such standardized tests might show whether a student can recognize logic and organization, but these tests rarely reveal a student's ability to practice logic and organization in his own writing. When determining the usefulness of multiple-choice tests, Edward M. White, a professor of English at California State University, points out "the unresolved problem that remains is to determine the meaning of those numbers [relating to scores and distributions] and their appropriate use in the context of the measurement of writing ability" ("Pitfalls" 73). Multiple choice assessments may prove beneficial in providing baseline data about curricular programs and students' skills in recognizing standard English; however, these assessments do not mirror the types of writing—"purposeful thinking and writing"

(Applebee 41)—students are asked to do in the classroom. In other words, these assessments neither improve students' writing, nor do they provide students, teachers, and parents with useful information needed to improve student writing.

Because of the inadequacies of standardized multiple-choice tests in providing useful feedback to both students and teachers, educators have moved toward various forms of "authentic" assessments. In general, "authentic" assessments are designed to help students apply their learning to real world tasks, specifically tasks that involve "problem solving, comprehension, writing, critical thinking, and metacognitive skills" (Fuchs 1). The direct writing assessment is becoming more popular as a form of "authentic" assessment. This assessment requires students to write—often within a specified amount of time—in response to a topic. A direct writing assessment is designed to expose "many facets of students' abilities: It indicates, for example, how well students can think through a particular topic, develop their ideas, express those ideas, and control their sentence structure and mechanics" (Wolcott 12). In addition to formal testing, such types of direct writing assessments can and do occur informally, with or without time constraints, in various high school courses. As with any assessment, however, the method used to evaluate the direct writing determines the usefulness of the assessment. If direct assessments are scored using a holistic or primary trait[1] scoring guide or are used solely for the purpose of gathering baseline data, then students are not truly learning from the assessments. After receiving a score based upon a holistic or primary trait guide, the next logical question for any

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[1] Both holistic and primary trait scoring are further explained later in chapter one in the section entitled "Definitions."

conscientious student to ask is, "Why did I get that score?" Most students (and adults) want feedback so they can "fix" whatever is wrong the next time.

In an effort to assess student competency in writing, the West Des Moines Community School District in West Des Moines, Iowa, has spent the last four years drafting content standards and benchmarks for writing. Each year, the standards and benchmarks have been revised and the performance tasks have been changed in order to better assess student performance.[2] Since the development of the standards, though, many high school teachers, students, and parents in the district fail to connect standards with instruction, and most view the performance tasks as "one more thing to fit in" as teachers plan their semesters. In addition to standards and benchmarks, the West Des Moines Community School District uses the standardized Iowa Writing Assessment, which is linked to both the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Iowa Test of Educational Development, to assess writing competency. The purpose of this direct assessment is "to measure students' abilities to generate, organize, and express their ideas in a variety of written forms" ("Iowa Writing Assessment"). To score each essay, the district uses a four-point analytic scoring guide focusing on Ideas/Content, Organization, Voice, and Conventions. The criteria for these traits correlate to the criteria of the corresponding traits found in the *Six Traits Scoring Guide*. Two trained readers score each paper using the analytic guide, then each set of scores is averaged. If a discrepancy of more than one point exists between the two scores in any category, a third reader scores the paper. The third score is averaged with the other two sets.[3]

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[2] A draft of West Des Moines Community School District's writing standards, benchmarks, and performance tasks for 2001 can be reviewed in Appendix A.

[3] Training and reliability for this and other writing assessments will be discussed in the section entitled "Limitations to the Proposal" (chapter five).

Even with a more standardized method of assessment, teachers and students still struggle to connect the assessment with learning. For an assessment to measure student learning accurately, then greater correlation must be developed between curriculum and assessment.

Successful assessments not only substantiate student achievement but also connect teaching and learning. English professor Philip Boswood Ballard identifies testing as an integral part of the learning process: "It is the only way in which [the learner] can find out whether he is making any progress, and if so how much" (161). While assessments fulfill the expected purpose of assigning necessary proficiency levels to students on any particular task, assessments are perhaps more valuable to educators than to students. A competent educator will often design and use assessments that will provide specific information to help him shape lessons around the needs of his students. White clarifies, "Assessment can improve our teaching, make our jobs easier and more rewarding, and demonstrate the value of what we do" (Teaching 8). If an effective writing assessment could be found that would encourage students' learning, that would provide students with tools to improve their writing, and that would adapt to a variety of assignments, levels, settings, and genres, then educators would likely see great improvements in student writing. Such an assessment would take the form of an analytic scoring guide using a common language and adapting to various purposes and tasks, helping students to discover and to trace areas of strengths and weaknesses in their writing. Similar to athletes in training, students could pinpoint their weaknesses and focus their efforts on building strength where needed.

## Significance of the Problem

As stated earlier, writing is quickly becoming crucial to one's personal, social, and professional success. On a personal level, individuals who do not possess the skills to write clearly and effectively often feel voiceless and left behind. These individuals might hesitate to express their opinions in fear of being stereotyped as poor and/or uneducated. Others do not always realize what they have missed. Often these individuals also pass up opportunities for advancement (or are passed over) due to their inability to write effectively. One indicator of a person's language skills and abilities to organize is a résumé, and people who cannot write clear résumés do not make the first cut. The 1992 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), co-developed by Statistics Canada and the Educational Testing Service in the U.S., defined literacy as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Literacy, Economy and Society 14). An important component of this survey was the role of writing in work and civic participation. After extensive surveys in several countries including the United States, researchers concluded, "Literacy is strongly correlated with life chances and use of opportunities" (Literacy, Economy and Society 116). Approximately 50% of Americans with poor to moderate writing skills (as determined by the IALS survey) felt their writing skills limited job opportunities (Literacy, Economy and Society 104).

For many, however, writing has the power to be a significant social equalizer: one that does not require an individual to be wealthy or to have social connections. In *The Graves of Academe*, professor of English at Glassboro State College Richard Mitchell asserts, "The real value of teaching everybody, *everybody,* to write clear,

coherent, and more or less conventional prose: The words we write demand far more attention than those we speak" (29). People pay attention to the written word: a carefully composed, articulate letter of complaint written to a company president will often yield better results than an oral confrontation with a store manager; a series of well-written, lucid letters to the editor will often gain more attention than a demonstration; a concise yet well-structured product proposal will often convince buyers to invest more than a sales pitch. To experience success in these and similar situations leads to an increase in social and personal efficacy.

E.D. Hirsch, author of *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know,* argues that Americans need a standard base of knowledge, or a cultural literacy, in order to experience success. This cultural literacy extends to the ability to express that knowledge in a standard, acceptable form. Hirsch observes, "Traditional instruction in reading, writing, and spelling...is the road to effectiveness in modern life, in whatever direction one wishes to be effective" (23). Successful individuals can communicate competently both in speech and writing. For the most part, American society demands literate citizens; "Literate culture has become the common currency for social and economic exchange in our democracy, and the only available ticket to full citizenship" (Hirsch 22). Albert Tuijnman, member of the French Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, judiciously concludes that individuals with poor literacy skills "face increased risks of social alienation and economic exclusion" (Literacy, Economy and Society 22). Miscommunication, which often occurs between cultures—even within a universal society—can have serious repercussions: the greater the

consequences of misunderstanding, the greater the importance of clarity in communication.

The inability to write also affects the nation's businesses. In a 1994 *New York Times* article, Louis V. Gerstner Jr. notes, "American businesses...lose an estimated $25 to $30 billion a year as result of their workers' weak reading and writing skills" (Sykes 22). A 1992 Louis Harris survey asked employers to comment on the writing skills of their recently hired employees, and only 12 percent found their new employees possessed proficient writing skills. The same survey investigated the opinions of colleges and universities that estimated that only 18 percent of high school graduates had advanced writing competencies (Sykes 29). Our national economy cannot continue to support the inadequacies of employees. Companies are searching for employees who can communicate coherently and efficiently through writing. Individuals who possess skill in writing increase their chances of successful and lucrative careers. Some might argue that technology exists to assist with spelling, grammar, and mechanics so that one no longer needs good writing skills; however, the ability to express oneself both fluently and intelligently through writing while retaining a bit of creativity and individuality is key to one's advancement in business today. Computer programs cannot yet replace these skills.

Charles J. Sykes, author of *Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves, but Can't Read, Write, or Add*, refuses to mince words when speaking of America's lack of writing skills: "American students are rotten spellers and their writing is often a grammatical embarrassment" (95). While his words may chafe educators, he is using writing effectively to express his (and others') opinions.

America's schools need to teach students how to write and need to provide ample opportunity to improve writing skills. Amid the negativity directed toward our nation's schools, one can find a positive trend toward communicating the importance of good writing skills. Schools are beginning to see a need to use common and consistent evaluative language to provide feedback across the curriculum that will help students to improve their writing. The *Six Traits Analytical Scoring Guide* is a tool that provides a common language that all teachers may use (whole or in part) to encourage student improvement in writing.

## Definitions

Much controversy surrounds various writing assessments, so readers should clearly understand the three main types of assessments: holistic, primary trait, and analytical.

Currently, holistic scoring is widely used for statewide assessments, placement tests, and national standardized assessments. This type of scoring values the whole more than individual parts. As Willa Wolcott clarifies, "A paper is scored in terms of the overall impression—the synergistic effect—that is created by the elements working together within the piece" (71). The holistic scoring guide often contains specific criteria based upon standard elements written expression (ideas, organization, fluency, diction, grammar, mechanics); however, the score is based upon how the elements work together in the paper to achieve a total effect. In large-scale holistic assessments, evaluators generally match students' papers to exemplars or anchor papers representing each level of scoring. Though holistic scoring guides prove valuable in large-scale assessments, the generic scoring guides do not allow for differences in

purpose and audience of various genres. Holistic guides also fail to provide valuable feedback to writers. In scoring a paper using a five-point scale based upon ideas, organization, mechanics, and fluency, one student may receive a score of three due to strong ideas and organization with weak mechanics and fluency, and another student may receive a three due to strong fluency and nearly flawless mechanics with few substantive ideas and confusing organization (Spandel 25).

Primary trait scoring picks up where holistic leaves off; primary trait scoring identifies "precisely what segment of discourse will be evaluated…and [trains] readers to render holistic judgments accordingly" (Lloyd-Jones 37). Primary trait assessments focus on specific purposes and audiences; thus, the primary trait of a letter to the editor could be to develop a fallacy-free argument. The overall score will be a reflection of the student's ability to display the primary trait. This type of scoring proves extremely useful when focusing on a specific skill (persuasion, organization, voice, diction, syntax, research); however, similar to holistic scoring, primary trait scoring fails to provide teachers or writers with much feedback about strengths and weaknesses. In addition, teachers often find it difficult to focus on just one trait, while setting aside other important traits of good writing such as fluency, grammar, and mechanics.

Also related to holistic scoring is the third type of scoring guide, the analytic guide, which proves beneficial to students in supplying feedback that students can use to improve their writing. Analytic scoring guides "share an attempt to distinguish between the elements of form and content—between larger rhetorical issues and the more surface concerns of mechanics and grammar" (Wolcott 113). Analytic scoring guides identify the main traits of good writing and define each trait with criteria at

determined levels of proficiency (Spandel 26). Thus, these guides can be tailored to specific assignments and can provide writers with specific and necessary feedback to encourage revision and growth. Although useful in providing useful feedback, teachers often find that learning to use an analytic scoring guide can be very time consuming. As with holistic and primary trait scoring, analytic scoring can be subject to rater bias; therefore, teachers should be trained to judge various levels of proficiency and should collaborate with colleagues on a regular basis in order to retain an acceptable level of interrater reliability.[4]

One such analytic scoring guide is the *Six Traits Analytical Scoring Guide* designed by small groups of teachers working with Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (History of the 6+1). In this scoring guide, writing is broken down into six common traits of good writing: ideas, or the heart of the message; organization, or the internal structure; voice, or evidence of the writer behind the message; word choice, or the vocabulary or terminology; sentence fluency, or the rhythm and flow—how it plays to the ear; and conventions, or the mechanical correctness of the piece (History of the 6+1). A student's paper can receive a different score for each trait; for example, a student may receive a three out of five for ideas, a four in organization, a two in voice, and so forth. As this paper will focus on the *Six Traits Analytical Scoring Guide*, these six traits will be further explained later.[5] Many teachers prefer an analytic scoring guide due to the reduction in the time between receiving and returning student papers as well as the increase in valuable feedback to students. Students also appreciate receiving more feedback faster so that they can improve their writing skills.

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[4] A discussion of interrater reliability is found in the section entitled "Limitations to the Proposal" in chapter five.

## Organization

Chapter one has not only presented the problem and its significance but also defined necessary terms. This paper continues by exploring the historical development of writing instruction and assessment in American schools. While an exhaustive investigation of all writing textbooks published during this period would allow readers to follow precisely the path to modern methodology, the purpose of chapter two is to show that changes occurred and that these changes affect writing instruction today. This chapter briefly introduces six texts that represent trends in the teaching of writing during the first part of the twentieth century. Chapter three explains the importance of language in writing appropriate assessments, particularly in writing analytical scoring guides. Chapter four specifically examines the *Six Traits Analytical Scoring Guide* model and its impact on pedagogy and student achievement. In chapter five, the author will address the feasibility of using the common language found in the *Six Traits Model* to increase writing efficacy of students at Valley High School in West Des Moines, Iowa.

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[5] Chapter four contains a detailed summary of each trait. Readers may also refer to Appendices B and C for rubrics and criteria.

# CHAPTER II:

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

### Background

A close examination of how writing instruction emerged and evolved in American high schools will help not only to evaluate and to understand current writing instruction and assessment but also to establish a common language for future instruction and assessment. In order to effectively study the evolution of writing instruction in America, one must first uncover its roots.

The instruction of writing grew out of the study of rhetoric, the ability to practice effective persuasion or to develop believable arguments (Welch 1). Formal writing instruction appears to have surfaced first in fifth century B.C. Greece. Great rhetoricians such as Plato, Isocrates, Socrates, Euripides, Aristotle, and others provided models of writing to be emulated for centuries. These individuals were celebrated for their eloquent oral discourse and their finely-crafted arguments. Writing lay at the root of their persuasive discourse; these great rhetoricians relied on the written word to organize their thoughts and arguments as well as to record their discourse for future generations. Plato used writing to advocate his utopian beliefs, and Isocrates encouraged students to think critically through writing (Welch 15-17).

In the Grecian primary schools, writing was taught as a technique; but in the secondary schools, writing was taught through careful and concentrated study of the classical writers of the time, specifically Homer and other Hellenistic writers. Higher education emphasized instruction in both writing and speaking, focusing specifically on the power contained in the exactness of words (Welch 9-15). The Roman educational

system followed the Grecian models as Cicero, Quintilian, and others carried rhetoric into Latin and established a framework of methodology for teaching writing, even publishing books on the instruction of rhetoric (*De Inventione*—Cicero; *Rhetorica ad Herennium*--anonymous) (Murphy "Roman Writing" 20-25).

Due to the exclusive nature of education in the male-centered schools of ancient Greece and Rome, one can surmise that students were self-motivated to reach the highest level of proficiency possible. Historian James Murphy explains that ancient Roman schools "provided literacy for some, competence for many, excellence for a few; the dividing line between these three levels of accomplishment was based simply on the length of time the student could spend in the program" ("Roman Writing" 40). Consequently, assessment as known today did not exist. Rather, once a student progressed beyond the basic language and writing skills (which included grammar instruction), he would train specifically under a rhetorician. Based upon suggestions made in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* (A.D. 95), emphasis was placed on mastery of each particular skill set in order to tackle a new and more challenging set (Murphy "Roman Writing" 56). A student's education culminated in a rhetorical exercise called *Declamation*, a classroom oration over an assigned political or judicial issue, which proved the student's mastery of rhetorical skills. In preparing his *Declamation*, a student used writing to shape and defend his argument (Murphy "Roman Writing" 61-64).

By the Middle Ages, the need for effective oratory became evident among European nations. Thus, traditional rhetorical instruction became a necessity for privileged children. Instructors continued to look to classical rhetoricians for guidance.

According to Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, the Roman rhetorical instruction included training in Precept (grammar, invention, arrangement, style, memory, delivery), Imitation, Composition exercises, Declamation, and Sequencing (Murphy "Roman Writing" 75-76).   Quintilian's lessons (based upon Roman principles of rhetoric developed centuries before) carried far into the 1100's as John of Salisbury noted that Quintilian's pedagogy was still employed in English schools (Murphy "Roman Writing" 69-71).  The primary means of evaluating a student's skill in rhetoric came through oral examinations similar to those used in ancient Roman schools (Lunsford 2). The pedagogical methods established by the ancient Greeks and systematized by the ancient Romans influenced rhetorical instruction for hundreds of years to come.  In fact, classical canonical authors such as Cicero, Horace, Vergil, and Milton studied the rhetorical principles that Quintilian established in *Institutio Oratoria* (Murphy The Rhetorical Tradition 8).  The ancient rhetorical principles and methodology suffused the continent well into the nineteenth century, and universities across Europe uniformly supported the study of classical rhetoric in the languages of origin.  Slowly, however, writing instruction began to drift away from the study of classical language and rhetoric.

Upon the arrival of rhetoric instruction in America, small changes began to surface.  American students were gradually exposed to examples of writing outside the ancient classics and were given the freedom to practice individual expression.  Still, the primary means of assessing a student's skill in rhetorical forms was through the transcription of dictated texts and oral examination (Halloran 155).   Much like Quintilian's *Declamation,* America's secondary students prepared yearly for a series of oral examinations in all their subjects and for oral disputations during which students

presented and defended a thesis in front of classmates and teachers. In order to better develop their oral presentations, students wrote out their discourses. A group of teachers judged each student's readiness to move to the next level (Lunsford 3-4). These sorts of oral examinations were designed to ensure students were skilled in speaking and critical thinking so that they could influence and enhance society.

The establishment of American high schools and the need for a more consistent mode of instruction led to the formation of a type of writing instruction designed to meet new societal needs. During this era of change in American education, the nature of writing instruction was transformed from intensive study and imitation of classical rhetoricians who primarily wrote for oral performance in the original languages to the study and practice of writing meant for silent reading in standard English.

The common school movement of the nineteenth century established the importance of grammar and composition in the American curriculum. Common schools were to be great equalizers which allowed many American children, primarily those with European backgrounds, an opportunity for success. In these common schools, writing became "a medium of evaluation" to revolutionize the curriculum (Halloran 167). The writing curriculum of the common school emphasized competence in standard modes of discourse: description, narration, exposition, and argumentation (Halloran 168). While these categories were not innovative, the emerging pedagogical approaches to writing were often considered radical. Students composed original pieces rather than regurgitated memorized texts; students used their own experiences as topics instead of teacher selected and often abstract ideas; students practiced writing for a variety of purposes rather than strictly for university use (Schultz 33). While parsing (defining and

explaining the grammatical structure of any given word, paraphrasing (checking comprehension), and analyzing (interpreting meaning and form) were still used as primary means of evaluating a student's rhetorical skills, new methods of writing instruction and assessment were being introduced. For the first time, ordinary American schoolchildren were being encouraged to think as individuals, a skill to carry America and industry into the twentieth century. Often, however, the abilities to read and to write remained rare.

During this time, writing instruction also reflected the pervading educational purpose of social efficiency; America needed to educate its masses to fulfill societal needs. This emphasis on social needs produced a movement away from memory-based instruction toward practice-based instruction. Another influence on writing instruction was the phenomenon of industrialization at the end of the century, which carried writing instruction to the next level. Industrialization not only created a need for a literate population of innovative thinkers but also upgraded the delivery of education. With the improvement of pens, pencils, and ink, students could write more easily. The decrease of paper costs allowed students to write more and to revise more often. As society moved toward industrialization, the need for literate citizens also increased dramatically. Toward the latter part of the century, more and more students were attending school regularly and for longer periods of time. The encouragement for a common school education for European American children was also an encouragement for a practical education which would benefit society as a whole. Thus, the classical pedagogical traditions were "adapted to the needs of the changing American culture

and served as an art of political competency for the widening enfranchised public"
(Halloran 178).

The twentieth century brought tremendous increases in enrollment in American
schools (particularly high schools) and universities which, in turn, led to the need for
common curriculum standards. Emphasis moved away from oral examinations toward
written discourse, and the foundations of instruction in classical rhetoric began to
crumble. Andrea A. Lunsford, a professor of English at the University of British
Columbia, explains that "writing shifted its focus from discovering and sharing
knowledge to being able to produce a 'correct' essay on demand; lost the theoretical
framework that related language, action, and belief; and became increasingly
preoccupied with standards of usage" (6). American institutions of higher learning
began to explore ways to objectively assess students' readiness to enter and exit the
universities. As Harvard introduced a written entrance exam on standard writings and
authors, other American universities endeavored to have similar standard entrance
requirements as well. (Berlin 187). This standardized written exam suggested that the
applicant had explored a wide variety of writings; however, difficulties arose when the
definition of *standard* differed from district to district. In his 1939 text *Teaching and
Testing English,* London professor Philip Boswood Ballard notes great discrepancies in
the public examiner markings of student essays (134-136). The examiners received
specific instructions for marking; however, inconsistencies abounded due to the differing
ideas of good writing. And when periods of greater than a year had passed, the
examiners gave significantly different marks on 92 out of 210 essays (Ballard 137-138).
Nevertheless, the creation of a written entrance exam did serve as a precursor for

current entrance essays.  Following the emergence of a written entrance exam, the nature of secondary English courses began to change in order to better prepare students.

In an attempt to address teachers' concerns over appropriate preparation for the entrance exams, the National Education Associated appointed the Committee of Ten to scrutinize the curriculum in secondary schools (Berlin 187).  After close examination of American high schools, the committee-appointed Conference on the Study of English asserted two main principals of teaching English in schools:

(1) to enable the pupil to understand the expressed thoughts of others and to give expression to thoughts of his own; and (2) to cultivate a taste for reading, to give the pupil some acquaintance with good literature, and to furnish him with the means of extending that acquaintance.

(qtd. in Burrows 24)

The same subcommittee then indicated the following necessary areas of study within the writing curriculum:  " (a) Letter writing; (b) relating of some simple incidents and explanation of familiar subjects; (c) analysis of pieces of writing; (d) reports; (e) literary composition; (f) debate" (qtd. in Burrows 27).  The subcommittee also noted that students must also practice and perfect customary grammatical and mechanical forms (Burrows 28).  With those noteworthy assertions, the Conference on the Study of English endorsed a significant departure from classical study and encouraged practical application of writing during the learning process.  As a result, traditional rhetoric began to be challenged by the liberal culture surfacing in American universities.  English professor James Berlin writes, "Liberal culture represented the reaction of the old, elite

colleges to the new meritocratic university" (190). With education as the great social equalizer, public school students now had equal opportunity (as the times allowed) to enter colleges and universities based upon their academic achievements rather than their social backgrounds. Thus, creating curriculum that encouraged students to meet the standards of American universities became a goal of high schools across the nation. Berlin also remarks that American high school English classes during the twentieth century were "marked by uncertainty and experimentation, the only constant being the reading of literary texts and some sort of writing in response to them" (191). Writing courses needed to strike a balance between preparing students for higher education and imparting students with practical skills that could be applied in a variety of tasks necessary for social and business life.

Writing assessment continued to pose a challenge; the tests created and scored by Harvard and other universities were highly subjective. To answer some of the questions surrounding the subjectivity of tests, the College Entrance Examination Board was founded in 1900. This board developed a national English Composition Test; however, like the previous university examinations, it could not be relied upon as a fair measurement of student skill since scores seemed to rely more on who read the paper than on what a student wrote (Godshalk et al).[6] With increasing numbers of students applying to universities, a more objective method of assessment replaced the traditional essay examinations. Following World War I, the College Board introduced a multiple-choice objective test which focused on universal writing skills. Although these standard

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[6] This conclusion based on the research of L. Thomas Hopkins who questioned the reliability and validity of the scores determined by members of the Committees of Examiners. His findings were published in: "The Marking System of the College Entrance Examination Board." Harvard Monographs in Education, 1:2. October 1921. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education. (Out of Print)

tests were more efficient to score, questions regarding reliability and validity still arose (Godshalk et al. 2). Despite reservations, the objective test thrived; and high school students today take similar objective tests—the ACT and the SAT—to determine readiness for college studies.

In the mid-1900s, the focus of writing instruction shifted from the product to the process, and the emphasis on grammar and mechanics decreased. The writing process itself was thought to naturally guide students along the path to better writing; some scholars believed that competence in classical conventions of writing would emerge as students practiced the process. Most student writing occurred primarily in the English classroom, "a free and supportive environment in which the student is encouraged to engage in an art of self discovery" (Berlin 210). The writing process required students to gather their thoughts using various prewriting strategies, to organize their thoughts in outlines, to write multiple drafts, and to collect beneficial peer and adult feedback prior to revising and publishing. The skills taught by rhetoricians were greatly de-emphasized in favor of personal discovery through writing. This type of instruction permeated American textbooks and writing pedagogy and led to present-day methodology.

The early 1960s experienced an increase in writing assessment research. Researchers were searching for validity and reliability in assessment methods used both in and beyond the classroom. Highly objective, multiple choice tests were considered more reliable and less biased than written exams; however, these tests also caused a trend of "teaching to the test" which rewarded rote learning of simplistic generalities (Witte et al). At the same time, teachers were also encouraged to allow

students to write freely and to develop writing skills naturally through frequent writing. In the 1968 edition of his popular textbook, *A Writer Teaches Writing,* Donald Murray advises teachers to allow students to take responsibility for their own education. He asks teachers not to act as "ultimate evaluator, editor, critic, or judge" and to allow students to write "according to their own abilities, ambitions and opportunities" (129). Murray continues to instruct teachers to avoid correcting papers; rather, teachers should offer general suggestions for improvement and allow fellow classmates to offer revision and editing suggestions as well (135-137). This workshop approach to writing became widely-accepted as schools across the nation changed curriculum to focus on the writing process and the emergence of writers.

Current methods of writing instruction can uncover their roots in the pedagogy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and looking to the past will help elucidate high school writing instruction and assessment today. As always, the purpose of any type of writing is to convey meaning. In teaching writing, teachers must also convey the meaningfulness of the task through instruction and assessment. The process approach of writing instruction evolved primarily out of the liberal movement surfacing in American colleges and universities. The approach encouraged student writing and individual expression but largely ignored the importance of conventions and rhetorical forms still important to effective writing. Knowledge of style and of form was supposed to materialize as students continued to write, to revise, and to write some more. Writing assessments placed more weight on content than on style and conventions. For example, the Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District in Ohio formulated a rubric which placed a weight of 50% on Content

(characterized as *convincing, organized, thoughtful, broad, specific*), a weight of 30% on Style (characterized as *fluent, cultivated, strong*), and a weight of 20% on Conventions (characterized as *correct writing form, conventional grammar)* (Judine 159). Similar rubrics and weighting systems were found in writing classrooms across the nation.

Teachers began to place more emphasis on the writing process by granting grades for each stage: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publication (Cotton). In the writing classroom, students were allowed to rewrite extensively; outside the writing classroom, writing assignments rarely existed (Berlin 212-213). In a discussion given in 1962 at the Yale Conference on the Teaching of English, R. Stanley Peterson asserts that teachers often place "too great emphasis on mechanics and not enough on the constructive aspects of the teaching of composition" (73). Thus, a process-oriented approach to teaching writing spread through the nation. Holistic scoring, as defined in chapter one, became a fashionable means of assessment. At the same time, however, students continued to face standardized assessments such as the ACT and SAT which objectively determined their writing abilities based upon their knowledge of standard writing conventions and skills. To prepare their students for these and other standardized tests, teachers specifically taught to the tests (Berlin 212). These tests failed to measure writing ability, and individuals soon began to notice decreases in writing ability.

While English teachers focused on the process, colleagues who did assign writing began to note a decline in the quality of the product. Teachers observed apparent lack of skills in classical conventions of writing: grammar, mechanics, diction (word choice) and syntax (sentence structure). Just as languages have standards of

style and form to facilitate oral communication, so do languages have standards to aid written communication. The modern American society, full of diverse peoples and cultures, needs citizens who can effectively communicate in a common language through both oral and written discourse; and this communication relies on the ability to follow standard style and form. Although the writing process still proves fundamental in effective writing, many of the nation's English departments are revisiting the importance of style and of form in order to provide students with necessary tools to communicate effectively through writing.

New standards have been written at local, state, and national levels that integrate the process with the product. Rather than expecting correct and effective writing to simply emerge naturally, English teachers guide students through all stages of the writing process, from generating ideas to organizing thoughts and support to editing for conventions. Students still receive feedback on multiple drafts; however, the feedback is controlled and fits assessment expectations. Assessments such as portfolios, analytical rubrics (such as the *Six Traits Analytical Scoring Guide*), and even computer scoring are becoming increasingly popular as individual districts and states focus on their own assessment standards and achievement levels. However, unless teachers understand the foundations of current writing instruction, they will be unable to measure the value or usefulness of these alternative assessments.

**Examination of Texts**

In order to better understand the changing theories of writing instruction in American schools between the latter part of nineteenth century and the early twentieth

century, a sampling of commonly used writing texts (albeit not all-inclusive) used in high schools across the nation during that time period was selected for closer examination.

Voices of change were being heard during the early 1800's; however, due to the strength of neoclassicists (those who adhered to the rules of form and style established by classical authors), these voices were largely ignored. One such voice, John Frost, who authored *Easy Exercises for Composition* in 1839, anticipated the societal needs during the growth of industrialization of informed citizens who could solve problems and who could communicate quickly, effectively, and efficiently. In his text, Frost stressed that students should begin their writing instruction by writing original compositions; for students needed to feel comfortable writing before they could master the nuances of rhetoric (Schultz 43, 48).

The influence of the neoclassicists was still very present in the mid- to late-1800's, although evidence of shifting paradigms began to emerge. In his 1866 textbook *English Composition and Rhetoric: A Manual*, Alexander Bain encouraged the study of classical rhetoric and appropriate examples in order for students "to cultivate...a copious fund of expression, and to render more delicate their discrimination of good and ill effects" (3). For students to comprehend better the nuances of effective rhetoric, the textbook was divided into two parts. The first part focused on the elements of style, pertaining specifically to diction, syntax, and voice. The second part examined the five types of composition: description, narration, exposition, oratory, and poetry. In presenting his formula for gaining rhetorical skills, Bain believed that "sustained practice of Rhetorical *parsing*, or the applying of the designations, principles, and rules of Rhetoric, to authors studied, whether in English or in other languages, would eventually

form, in the mind of the pupil, an abiding ideal of good composition" (6). Although Bain would most likely have preferred Latin or Greek models, examples were taken from classical English literature and translations of successful rhetoricians. In acquiring rhetorical skills, Bain also stated that students should not be made to write themes, for they belong "rather to classes in scientific or other departments, than to a class in English composition" (6). Thus, he also advocated writing in other disciplines. Bain and like-minded textbook authors maintained that the key to successful rhetoric was the constant study of good writing—rather than the practice of writing original thoughts.

In 1873, College of New Jersey (Princeton) professor John S. Hart began to shift away from close classical study and imitation. Hart claimed that the purpose of his text, *A Manual of Composition and Rhetoric: A Text-Book for Schools and Colleges*, was "not to extend the boundaries of the science [of rhetoric] by excursions into debatable ground, but to present its admitted truths in a form easily apprehended" (iii). As further explanation, Hart advocated, "Rhetoric is closely allied, on the one side, to Grammar, which determines the laws of language, and, on the other, to Logic, which determines the laws of thought" (13). By dividing his textbook into two parts (part one focusing on style, or modes of expression, and part two focusing on invention, or finding what to say), Hart reinforced his belief that learning how to say what we want to say was more important than what we say. In addressing style first, Hart placed more emphasis on correct expression than on original thought. Hart, however, did not belittle the importance of original thought in a student's writing as his second section encouraged students to write from personal experience.

As the end of the nineteenth century approached, Edwin Herbert Lewis's textbook entitled *A First Book in Writing English* (1897) clearly reflected a change in approach to writing instruction. Like Hart, Lewis moved away from the classical approach to writing instruction in its strictest sense. In his text, we begin to see departure from the influence of the Committee of Ten. The Hosic Committee (chaired by James F. Hosic) recommended a reassessment of college examinations and a grade level sequence in the acquisition of skills (Burrows 31). The Hosic Committee recognized that "the first step toward efficiency in the use of language is the cultivation of earnestness and sincerity; the second is the development of accuracy and correctness; the third is the arousing of individuality and artistic consciousness" (qtd. in Burrows 27) and asserted that the content of composition courses "should appeal to the pupil as first in importance; organization, second; details of punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, choice of words (matters of careful scrutiny), third" (qtd. in Burrows 30). In keeping with these recommendations, Lewis encouraged teachers and students to use inductive thinking in acquiring knowledge (vii). Unlike many earlier textbook authors, he did not divide his textbook in preconceived sections in terms of style, technique, or ideas. Lewis did, however, attempt to persuade teachers to assign many themes to be written and rewritten or revised; these would be kept together in a file or portfolio for students to read later (ix, 2-3). As noted earlier, the improvement of writing instruments and paper meant that students could write more copiously; thus, Lewis suggested that students learn a writing process. In his "Introductory Explanations," he even mentioned the possibility of having students review each other's work in order to provide more feedback (2). Despite the encouragement of individual thought, a great

portion of the introduction still focuses on the appearance of the themes rather than the content.

At the turn of the twentieth century, William H. Maxwell and George J. Smith published *Writing in English: A Modern School Composition,* which begins to reflect the influence of a more liberal culture. Maxwell and Smith experimented with allowing students to read and to write whole compositions first in order to gain their interest before "laboring over the minutiæ of style and diction" (3). In this text, the word "composition" replaced rhetoric and was defined as "the skillfully ordered presentation of ideas" (Maxwell and Smith 4). Also, teachers using this text were encouraged to allow students freedom of thought as they discovered how language and rhetoric were used (Maxwell and Smith 4). Similar to Lewis's emphasis on inductive thinking, Maxwell and Smith also employed and encouraged the inductive method to present new points; therefore, the book progressed from whole to parts (5). This follows the timely belief that in order to cultivate productive adults who will benefit society, students must learn to think for themselves. Even the language used to present the information was less formal than in previous textbooks. Remnants of the classical theories remain, however, as imitation of good writing was still viewed as a viable and beneficial means of gaining writing skills (Maxwell and Smith 4).

Following the turn of the century, a group of professors at Yale University united to write and publish a definitive text, *English Composition in Theory and Practice* (1910), which would address the practical needs of students. The authors identified "straight thinking" as the most crucial skill in preparing good writing (Canby xi). Straight thinking was a crucial skill needed in many jobs created during the era of industrialization: "A

man who is capable of thinking can express himself at all times in clear, comprehensible, and unambiguous words" (Canby xi). Rather than following traditional classic pedagogy, the authors followed the precedence set in the common school movement and divided the textbook into four identified modes of discourse: exposition, argumentation, description, and narrative. Rhetorical style and mechanical/grammatical conventions were imbedded within these divisions. Regardless of this format, emphasis was not placed on writing style; instead, students were compelled first to learn how to express clear thoughts in the most effective manner and in proper form (Canby xii). These professors from Yale recognized that a transformation had been made in writing pedagogy; and they, as well as many other textbook authors, embraced the new ideas in keeping with the variable needs of a changing American society.

The changes in pedagogy illustrated in these textbook examples reflect not only the restructuring of rhetoric instruction and assessment but also new approaches to teaching children. Influenced by shifting societal needs, the reform movement which affected schools during the late 1800's and early 1900's, encouraged students to think on their own. As reviewed earlier, textbook authors such as John Frost and John Hart emphasized the importance of individual expression before mastery of writing conventions. As more emphasis was placed upon experienced-based writing, the way students learned to write was truly transformed.

Although the transformation was not immediate, American educators began to hear more and more about the educational reforms as the twentieth century quickly approached. A series of talks given in 1897 and 1901 by Arlo Bates, English professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology., illuminates the educational reform movement

as well as the new attitudes toward writing instruction at the end of the nineteenth century. In his lectures, Bates defined composition as "the art by which ideas and mental impressions are conveyed in written language" (*Talks on Writing English* 5). According to Bates, the ability to write or "to be capable of expressing with the pen genuine thoughts and real emotions with a reasonable hope that these will reach the reader not entirely distorted out of all resemblance to what they were when they left the mind of the writer" involves extensive practice (*Talks on Writing English* 11). In other words, writing is much more than restating the thoughts of others. Successful composition cannot happen overnight. The best way to learn anything is by doing it; therefore, in order to write well, one must write and rewrite and rewrite again. While original thoughts are still important, more emphasis is placed on the reworking, rewriting, rewording, and revising of those thoughts. Bates also recognized the relationship between writing skills and social advancement: "it is essential that every man or woman who hopes to make his or her way, at least to anything like eminence even comparative, shall be able to write fairly good English" (*Talks on Writing English* 15). The expression of a person's thoughts remains crucial, however, as "no man writes well with whom the chief end is not the work rather than the workmanship" (Bates *Talks on Writing English, 2nd Series* 2). Although at the time, some surely thought that Bates's appraisal of writing instruction a bit far-fetched, his thoughts are still present in current pedagogy.

Even the American government advocated a change in writing education to support social needs. The United States Office of Education published a report in 1917 entitled *Reorganization of English in the Secondary Schools* which encouraged

curriculum to move away from simply fulfilling college entrance requirements and emphasize personal and social needs (Berlin 195).  The government's new view is found in the report's opening remarks:

> The purpose of teaching composition is to enable the pupil to speak and write correctly, convincingly, and interestingly.  The first step in the use of language is the cultivation of earnestness and sincerity; the second is the development of accuracy and correctness; the third is the arousing of individuality and artistic consciousness.  (Berlin 196)

At the time, few schools embraced the idea that writing should focus on "individuality and artistic consciousness"; but as the social efficiency movement and progressivism found their way into curricular decisions, the teaching of writing began to change.  Berlin observes that during the years following WWII, "writing in secondary schools...was pursuing the path of life adjustment or of communications" (203).

The process approach to writing finally entered the national curriculum on a large scale during the late 1960's.  Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner supported the process approach, asserting that the process of writing was much more important than the final product.  Students would become successful writers when given the freedom to discover writing without thought to conventions (Berlin 207-208).  This approach to the teaching of writing spread quickly through American schools and remains popular today.  Now, however, English teachers are becoming increasingly aware of the need to teach standard writing skills (organization, sentence fluency, word choice, voice, and conventions).  As present educators search for effective ways to teach and to evaluate

writing, the importance of effective expression continues to become increasingly essential.

# CHAPTER III

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Characteristics of Good Writing

What makes good writing? The responses may vary widely in terminology but prove astonishingly similar in meaning. Evaluating student writing often leads to a discussion about grading practices and an inquiry into universal qualities of good writing. Over the years, grades have become a necessary evil in writing classrooms. Writing is difficult to grade; there is no absolute formula that will result in the one and only correct grade. Some processes of grading classroom writing are extremely subjective, and the grade often depends upon the training, interests, and opinions of the teacher.

Beginning in the 1960's, Paul Diederich, a specialist in assessment, set out to define standards of writing so as to improve the reliability of grading essays (1). In the introduction to *Measuring Growth in English*, Diederich notes, "Grades generate anxiety and hard feelings between students, between students and teachers, between students and their parents, and between parents and teachers" (2). With this great amount of stress, one may easily understand the desire to eliminate grades altogether as Diederich suggests (20). Nevertheless, grades have become a part of school life. At best, they should indicate a student's level of achievement as well as potential for improvement. However, the grades themselves as represented by a letter or a percentage do not provide adequate information to students and parents. Therein lies the problem. How can students improve their writing skills (and their grades) if they do not know what they need to do to "fix" or improve their writing?

In an attempt to provide sufficient and appropriate feedback to students, Diederich and colleagues asked sixty writing judges from both academic and non-academic fields to read and grade 300 essays written by college freshmen. The judges were asked to comment on the qualities that they thought determined a good or poor piece of writing. Diederich and his colleagues then compiled and analyzed the grades and comments to determine the most common indicators of good writing. Together, they identified five factors: ideas, mechanics, organization, wording, and flavor (9). The qualities were then split into two categories—general merit (consisting of *ideas, organization, wording,* and *flavor*) and mechanics (subsequently split into four subskills: *usage, punctuation, grammar,* and *handwriting*)—and given numerical properties based upon the importance of the skill. Diederich used the following scale in New York to help teachers "develop a common set of standards and a systematic way of thinking about the qualities that should enter into their judgment of a paper":

|  | Low |  | Middle |  | High |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ideas | 2 | 4 | 6 | 8 | 10 | |
| Organization | 2 | 4 | 6 | 8 | 10 | |
| Wording | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Flavor | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | _____ |
| Usage | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Punctuation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Spelling | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Handwriting | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | _____ |
| | | | | | Sum | _____ |

(Diederich 54)

Each factor has criteria for high, middle, and low proficiency so that teachers can communicate with a "common vocabulary" in order to discuss student writing (55).

Other researchers who have devised grading scales using similar characteristics and criteria have established the validity of Diederich's characteristics and criteria.

In a study designed by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) to measure performance in writing throughout the world, Alan C. Purves and colleagues developed an analytic scale similar to Diederich's to rate writing (Purves 116). In order to account for possible differences across languages and cultures, Purves called upon an international jury to read a wide selection of compositions and to provide comments for each piece. After reviewing the comments, the IEA team listed various adjectives followed by numbers ranging from one (low skill) to five (high skill). The list and compositions were then given to a new international jury which scored the essays using the listed adjectives. From the results of this second evaluation, the IEA team identified five key factors that affected the ratings: content, organization, style and tone, surface features (grammar, punctuation, spelling, handwriting), and personal response of the reader (Purves 116, 122). A set of criteria was then developed based on a scale of five (one indicating low and five indicating high) for each factor in order to evaluate compositions. Purves used this analytical rubric to compare student writing performance in fourteen separate educational systems around the world.

Donald M. Murray has long been an important figure in the instruction of writing across the United States. Relying on his extensive experience as a writer and as a writing instructor, Murray proposes six components that all good writing shares: meaning, authority, voice, development, design, and clarity (Learning by Teaching 66-67). These traits resemble those suggested by the research of both Diederich and

Purves. In the second edition of *A Writer Teaches Writing*—a popular handbook for writing teachers—Murray suggests a slightly longer list of good writing characteristics: information, honesty, focus, form, development, documentation, closure, and voice (141).

Educators outside the United States are also concerned with the assessment of writing. Peter Gannon identifies the need for teachers in Great Britain to utilize forms of diagnostic assessment which provide useful feedback for student improvement rather than "impression marking" (holistic grading) which best provide statistical information for large-scale assessments (61-62). In his task assessment sheet, Gannon identifies the following functions of good writing: *shaping of text* (*overall structure* and *organization of content*), *vocabulary* (*appropriateness* and *variety*), *grammatical features* (*word structure and word order, sentence structure,* and *cohesion in/between sentences*), *spelling, punctuation,* and *originality and appropriateness of content* (64). Each function has specified criteria to make the grading process uniform.

## Analytical Scoring Guides

In determining what type of evaluation tool to employ for a particular writing assignment, a teacher must first determine the purpose of the assessment. If a teacher wishes to focus on a set of particular skills, then an analytic, task-specific assignment and scoring guide would be appropriate. On the other hand, if a teacher simply wants to provide a general grade for the entire assignment, then a holistic, general impression scoring guide would suffice. In high school classrooms, students are often expected to have a reserve of writing knowledge which they can apply to any assignment. In many cases, students have been introduced to and have even practiced specific skills that

lead to good writing; however, they lack practice in putting the skills together. When teachers grade an essay using a holistic scale, students lack specific feedback and often struggle to improve their writing. To experience increased success in writing classrooms, students need to understand what to improve. At the same time, teachers need to know what skills to teach or review. Unlike holistic or primary trait scoring guides, analytical scoring guides provide greater feedback to all individuals involved in the writing process.[7]

In many high school English classrooms, teachers give students general writing assignments without providing much guidance as to the quality of writing the teacher expects or how the writing will be assessed. To complete the assignment, students write "blindly" in hope of reaching a high level of achievement. When the assignment is returned with a grade placed at the top, students often express frustration at having no rationale behind the grade; without feedback of some sort, most students continue to struggle with improving their writing skills. With an analytic rubric provided with the writing assignment, the significant skills needed for successful completion of the assignment are identified in advance so that students have a better idea of expectations. Thus, students receive useful feedback to improve their writing. Even with the feedback, however, students need to be taught the individual skills that will help them to complete a task, any task, successfully. Teacher should provide ample instruction and practice of each skill identified on the analytical guide. One could equate this with a necessary life skill; in order to thrive in any job, an employee must understand and practice the individual skills that will help him achieve success.

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[7] The three basic types of scoring guides (holistic, primary trait, and analytic) are defined in chapter one.

## Six Traits Analytical Model: Background

The *Six Traits* (or *Six Traits +1*) *Analytical Model for Writing Assessment* first originated during the early 1980's in Beaverton, Oregon, and Missoula, Montana, with the help of Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Specifically, teachers in these two districts wanted to find an assessment method that would result in valid, reliable, and useful data about student writing. After searching for a common language (or shared vocabulary) to use with students, teachers, parents and the community, these teachers came back empty-handed. Collectively, these teachers and NWREL set out to produce an appropriate analytical assessment method to fulfill their needs (An Introduction to the 6+1 Traits 4).

To begin the process, teachers collected and read hundreds of student papers, and determined what characteristics made the papers outstanding, average, and below average. Then, the teachers made lists of common qualities of each category: outstanding, average, and below average. From those lists, qualities of "good" writing surfaced, which were subsequently called *traits*. After much collaboration and study, the teachers decided that all good writing contains six basic characteristics: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. An additional trait has since been added—presentation—that includes handwriting, formatting, and layout (An Introduction to the 6+1 Traits 4-5). These traits are very similar to the aforementioned traits identified by Diederich (ideas, mechanics, organization, wording, and flavor), Purves (content, organization, style and tone, and surface features), and Murray (meaning, authority, voice, development, design, and clarity). Each trait has a

set of criteria to define the level of achievement within a piece of writing, and the criteria will be explained in the next portion of this paper.

Thus, the six traits became a foundation for assessment. The criteria of the six-trait model have been revised to reflect the needs and suggestions of teachers throughout the United States. Appendix B contains a chart marketed by NWREL that may be used to evaluate the level of achievement of each trait. Depending upon the assignment and desired outcome, some teachers will use only one or two of the traits and some will add additional traits. In addition, some teachers may add to the criteria to individualize the assessment to a particular class, assignment, or student. Appendix D contains an example of a *Six Traits* rubric specific to a persuasive research paper. The number scale under each set of criteria has been adjusted to fit this author's classroom grading standards.

# CHAPTER IV

## Six Traits Analytical Model:  Rubric

The *Six Traits Analytical Scoring Guide* uses a five-point scale to assess the level of proficiency for each trait.  Generally, three sets of criteria exist for each trait; thus each receives a ranking (1=beginning or lowest, 3=developing or middle, 5=strong or highest), while a sort of middle ground (2=low-middle, 4=middle-high) exists for writers who fall on the border of two sets of criteria (Spandel 55-56).  The following continuum illustrates NWREL's five-point scale:

**WOW!**
Exceeds expectations

**5    STRONG:**
shows control and skill in this trait;
many strengths present

**4    COMPETENT:**
on balance, the strengths outweigh the weaknesses;
a small amount of revision is needed

**3    DEVELOPING:**
strengths and need for revision are about equal;
about halfway home

**2    EMERGING:**
need for revision outweighs strengths;
isolated moments hint at what the writer has in mind

**1    NOT YET:**
a bare beginning; writer not yet showing any
control

(An Introduction to the 6+1 Traits 8)

The five-point scale must be used with the criteria for each trait so that students more clearly understand their strengths and weaknesses. Realistically, a student might receive a different scale score for each of the six traits. These differences would allow such a student to identify skill areas to improve. Not all teachers will choose to use a five-point scale. Some teachers prefer a six-point scale in order to avoid a midpoint; therefore, Vicki Spandel, author of *Creating Writers* and expert in the *Six Traits Model*, presents definitions for a level six in order to allow room for writers who illustrate "wow" writing or who exceed the normal criteria (57, 59). Her "wow" criteria can be reviewed in Appendix C.

Although the general purpose of the *Six Traits Scoring Guide* is to provide students with feedback to improve their writing, teachers often try to "translate" the *Six Traits* scale scores into actual letter grades or percentages. Teachers should not assume, however, that the scale scores directly translate to a letter grade. A letter grade gives a holistic analysis of an end product; whereas, an analytic scale provides feedback on the specific parts of the end product. Thus, a score of five in any one trait does not automatically equal an "A." Neither does a score of two indicate "D" work. Teachers, however, may use the *Six Traits* scale scores as a component of students' overall grades. Teachers should also consider valuing the writing process as a component of students' grades. In addition to the *Six Traits Scoring Guide*, teachers are advised to use a total point grading system to report student progress. Teachers are also free to score only the traits most relevant to any assignment or to weigh particular traits in order to reflect instruction. Spandel points out that the scoring scale or continuum "is really only an *approximation*" and that even if a student should

consistently earn a three, she could not hit the same "precise spot on the continuum every single time" (378). When used in conjunction with classroom instruction, the language of the *Six Traits* helps students to find connections between classes. As teachers use a common language of instruction, students will more easily understand how to improve their writing. More important than translating the scale into a grade, however, is ensuring that students understand their scores and can improve their writing.

**Six Traits Analytical Model: Criteria**

For general classroom evaluation, this author prefers the more informal language (or word choice) of Spandel's criteria; however, the more formal language found in NWREL's criteria lend themselves to large-scale assessment. Teachers can use basic, common language and fashion specific descriptors that illustrate each trait without deviating from the understanding of the trait. Perhaps the best way to envision the possibility of these differences is by thinking of two similar jobs at two different companies, both with the same title and job description, but each having slightly different expectations which fit the nature of the business. Similarly, teachers may use the standard trait with its general meaning, then add task-specific criteria that would fall within the trait. The following paragraphs define each trait and set forth rating criteria. Readers who desire further explanation may refer to NWREL's criteria in Appendix B and Spandel's criteria in Appendix C.

The first of six traits is referred to as *Ideas* (also commonly called *Ideas and Content*). NWREL defines *Ideas* as "the heart of the message, the content of the piece, the main theme, together with all the details that enrich and develop that theme...details

that are interesting, important, and informative…details the reader would not normally anticipate" (An Introduction to the 6+1 Traits 6). Spandel takes the definition a bit further in order to help clarify meaning: "Ideas are the heart of the message: the main thesis, impression, or story line of the piece, together with the documented support, elaboration, anecdotes, images, or carefully selected details that build understanding or hold a reader's interest" (49). The two explanations do not show discrepancy; rather, they validate the flexibility of the scale. The criteria for *Ideas* revolve around the establishment of a main idea and sufficient support based upon the task and the genre of writing. Most generally, a paper earning a score of five in *Ideas* would have a significant, narrow topic or thesis supported by noteworthy details and evidence. If the topic is not quite narrow enough and the support doesn't quite lead to an adequate conclusion, then the paper would earn a score of three. When the paper lacks a clear focus and contains inadequate details, the paper would earn a score of one.

The second trait is *Organization*. In an introductory booklet to the *Six Traits Model*, NWREL offers this definition for *Organization*:

> Organization is the internal structure of a piece of writing, the thread of
> central meaning, the pattern, so long as it fits the central idea well.
> Organizational structure can be based on comparison-contrast, deductive
> logic, point-by-point analysis, development of a central theme,
> chronological history of an event, or any of a dozen other identifiable
> patterns…events proceed logically…connections are strong…the piece
> closes with a sense of resolution. (An Introduction to the 6+1 Traits 6)

For assignments that require a particular organizational structure, teachers can revise the general rubric to reflect the specified structure. For example, a business teacher might want her students to compare the successful expansion of two similar companies using a point-by-point analysis. She could adapt the language in her criteria to reflect the assigned task. In an effort to allow flexibility, Spandel begins with a broad definition of *Organization* as "the internal structure of the piece—like a skeleton or the framework of a building," then expands her explanation with specifics: "begin[ning] with an engaging lead and wrap[ping] up with a thought-provoking close…the writer links each detail or new development to a larger picture, building to a turning point or key revelation and always including strong transitions" (50). Subsequent criteria establish that writers who manage to use compelling internal structure to "[move] the reader purposefully through the text" would earn higher scores while writers who include loosely connected ideas and details would earn lower scores (50). Understanding that different tasks and disciplines require different organizational structures, the developers of the *Six Trait Model* allow teachers to fit the criteria to specific writing purposes. However, the organization of any piece of writing is the driving force behind comprehension; therefore, in order to help students become better writers, teachers must address appropriate organizational structures in a variety of settings and communicate the differences with a common language.

*Voice* is the third, and often the most confusing, trait in the model. In his research, Dierderich identified "flavor" as the quality in writing that shows readers the individuality of the author; however, due to the ambiguity surrounding his definition, many teachers found it difficult to assess this characteristic. In the past, student were

encouraged to write devoid of voice; authors were invisible and logical organization dominated compositions. According to NWREL, *Voice* shows "the writer coming through the words" giving "the sense that a real person is speaking...and cares about the message." The definition continues to capture the essence of *Voice*: "It is the heart and soul of the writing, the magic, the wit, the feeling, the life and breath" (An Introduction to the 6+1 Traits 6). This trait is greatly affected by the topic (what is the piece about?), the purpose (what does the writer wish to accomplish through writing the piece?), and the audience (who will read the piece?) of the writing; therefore, many teachers still find it difficult to verbalize specific criteria for *Voice*. Teachers often confuse *Voice* with a writer's point of view and instruct students to avoid the use of "I" (first-person point of view) in papers. *Voice*, however, is not defined by first-, second-, or third-person point of view. Good writing—regardless of discipline—has an individual voice that gives readers insight into the author's attitude toward the piece. Spandel explains, "Voice is the presence of the writer on the page. When the writer's passion for the topic and sensitivity to the audience are strong, the text virtually dances with life and energy, and the reader feels a strong connection to both writing and writer" (51). As a trait, *Voice* is present in all types of writing, from lab reports to political essays to memos; *Voice* is the characteristic that makes readers want to read. Teachers, students, and parents can examine today's print media for many examples of pieces both full and devoid of *Voice*. A news article that focuses on speaking directly to individual readers (without using "you") and requires a response from readers would earn a score of five; an article that does not involve the reader or shows no concern for the topic would earn a score of one.

The fourth trait, *Word Choice,* also depends upon purpose and audience. Often, students think they must choose impressive words found in a thesaurus in order to score points for *Word Choice*. However, an expansive vocabulary does not guarantee a high score. NWREL points out, "Word Choice is the use of rich, colorful, precise language that communicates not just in a functional way, but in a way that moves and enlightens the reader...strong word choice is characterized not so much by an exceptional vocabulary that impresses the reader, but more by the skill to use everyday words well" (An Introduction to the 6+1 Traits 7). With this definition, writers begin to understand that the ability to use words accurately in a variety of contexts is an important key to communication and comprehension. Precise and powerful words used to clearly portray the writer's message would earn a higher score. "Word choice is precision in the use of words—wordsmithery," writes Spandel. "It is the love of language, a passion for words, combined with a skill in choosing words to create just the mood, meaning, impression, or word picture the writer wants to instill in the heart and mind of the reader" (52). Writing that is full of misused words, redundancy, and clichés would invite a low score.

*Sentence Fluency,* the fifth trait, shows the rhythm and movement of the writing. Teachers across disciplines often use the word "awkward" to note sentences or passages in student writing that are confusing or difficult to read. Readers want to move freely through the writing; they don't want to be encumbered by an abundance of choppy sentences, strange word patterns, or unchanging sentence structures. NWREL explains, "Sentence Fluency is the rhythm and flow of the language, the sound of word patterns, the way in which the writing plays to the ear—not just to the eye...It is free of

awkward word patterns...Sentences vary in length and style" (An Introduction to the 6+1 Traits 7). *Sentence Fluency* is a trait that relies heavily on oral reading, much like the writing of the first great rhetoricians who wrote out their speeches in order to perfect the sound and impact of their words. Writing that invites expressive oral reading through sentence clarity and variety would earn fives on the scoring guide; writing that is easy to read aloud but lacks expression would earn threes; writing that is very difficult to read aloud and lacks fluidity would earn ones. In her scoring guide, Spandel expands the definition to include specific techniques that enhance *Sentence Fluency:* "Sentence fluency is finely crafted construction combined with a sense of rhythm and grace. It is achieved through logic, creative phrasing, parallel construction, alliteration, absence of redundancy, variety in sentence length and structure, and a true effort to create language that literally cries out to be spoken aloud" (53). Great rhetoricians such as Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates did just that—their works have been and continue to be models of excellence for writers and speakers alike.

*Conventions*, "the mechanical correctness of the piece," is the sixth trait in NWREL's model. This trait includes the nuts and bolts of good writing: "spelling, grammar and usage, paragraphing (indenting at appropriate spots), use of capitals, and punctuation" (An Introduction to the 6+1 Traits 7). Teachers beyond the English department consistently cite errors in the aforementioned criteria as impediments to their ability to understand let alone evaluate student writing. Evaluating *Conventions* will depend upon the age/grade of the writer; however, high school students should earn scores of fives by displaying accurate standard writing conventions so that readers can comprehend the message. Spandel defines *Conventions* in the terms of a

profession: "Almost anything a copy editor would attend to falls under the heading of conventions. This includes punctuation, spelling, grammar and usage, capitalization, and paragraphing" (54). Students who cannot begin to display control over common standard writing conventions should receive scores of one. Errors in *Conventions* are easy for the public to notice and can affect a person's success. Melanie VanMaanen, human resources officer for Maytag Corporation, notes that "strong oral and written communication skills are a must" for any candidate who seeks employment within the corporation. She cites the basics of writing, which include visible skill in grammar and mechanics, as crucial to effective communication. Employees who consistently make blatant errors in grammar and mechanics will be strongly encouraged to attend classes designed to improve on-the-job writing skills (VanMaanen). Skills that fall under conventions have often been overlooked by teachers at lower grade levels, particularly in districts that subscribe to the "whole language" method of teaching. A major precept of the "whole language" approach is that forms and functions of grammar and mechanics will appear naturally as students read and write freely. This idea has proven to be somewhat detrimental to a generation of Americans who failed to acquire the appropriate use of grammar and mechanics. As discussed in chapter one, the inability to communicate in Standard English can and does affect one's personal, social, and professional life. In order for Americans to experience success, they often must learn to communicate effectively through Standard English.

A seventh trait, *Presentation,* is often added at the primary levels of instruction but can also be important for particular types of assignments. *Presentation* involves the layout and formatting (even handwriting when applicable) of a piece; it is the way a

writer "exhibit[s his] message on paper" (<u>An Introduction to the 6+1 Traits</u> 7).  This trait is especially important when visuals such as maps or graphs must accompany the written text.  Appendix B contains NWREL's criteria for *Presentation*.

**Evaluation of Six Traits Model**

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory has organized several studies to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the *Six Traits Model* on student writing skills.  The majority of the research occurred in elementary classrooms.  Over the course of a year, NWREL documented the writing progress of six fifth-grade classrooms in the Portland, Oregon, area.  Three of the classrooms became the "control sites" in which regular instruction would continue while the other three became the "study sites" in which students were taught the traits and how to assess writing using the traits.  All classrooms participated in a pre- and post-assessment.  The three "study sites" showed greater improvements in all traits:

| Trait | Group | Pre | Post | Gain |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ideas | Study | 2.54 | 3.38 | +.84 |
|  | Control | 2.68 | 2.75 | +.07 |
| Organization | Study | 2.60 | 3.15 | +.55 |
|  | Control | 2.61 | 2.70 | +.09 |
| Voice | Study | 2.73 | 3.60 | +.87 |
|  | Control | 2.91 | 3.12 | +.21 |
| Word Choice | Study | 2.73 | 3.26 | +.53 |
|  | Control | 2.91 | 3.11 | +.20 |
| Sentence Fluency | Study | 2.85 | 3.12 | +.27 |
|  | Control | 2.87 | 2.89 | +.02 |
| Conventions | Study | 2.79 | 2.98 | +.19 |
|  | Control | 2.89 | 2.99 | +.10 |

(6+1 Trait™ Writing Assessment Summary Study Results)

The fifth-graders at Jennie Wilson Elementary school in Garden City, Kansas, demonstrated a 42% growth in narrative writing (based on the Kansas Writing

Assessment) after just three years after adopting the *Six Traits Model* (6+1 Trait™

Writing Assessment Summary Study Results). During the 1996-97 school year, the

Saudi Arabia/ARAMCO school increased the percentage of fourth-grade students who

performed at or above the institution's standards of writing performance. In the fall of

1996, 49% of the students met the standards while 36% exceeded standards; in the

spring of 1997, 50% met standards while 42% exceeded standards (6+1 Trait™ Writing

Assessment Summary Study Results). NWREL does not report any data for similar

studies conducted in high schools.

Chapter two discussed the usefulness of an analytical model in providing both

students and teachers with valuable feedback to use in improving student writing.

Oregon and Washington were leaders in adopting the *Six Traits Model* (or variations of

the model) as a standards-based assessment of student writing. Teachers of all

disciplines—from mathematics and science to art and music to foreign language and

special education—are using the *Six Traits Model* to improve their students' writing

skills. And because the method is very compatible with tests such as Advanced

Placement and International Baccalaureate, NWREL emphasizes that teachers in

Great Britain, France, China, Venezuela, Bahrain, Australia, Turkey and the Middle

East use the *Six Traits* (An Introduction to the 6+1 Traits 3). However, widespread use

of any curriculum or assessment does not guarantee its success. To be successful, the

*Six Traits Model* needs to improve significantly both classroom writing instruction and

students' writing skills.

A debate over the usefulness of alternative assessments continues to consume

educators and specialists, but most would agree that any sort of assessment needs to

be useful not only in evaluating students' proficiency but also in having a positive impact on instructional decision-making. In order to establish the educational viability of the *Six Traits Model* as a sound assessment, this author is using seven researched criteria proposed by Lynn S. Fuchs, a specialist in curriculum-based measurement (CBM) and performance–based assessment.

According to Dr. Fuchs, useful assessments should:

1. Measure important learning outcomes.
2. Address three assessment purposes (i.e. instructional placement, formative evaluation, and diagnosis of learning problems).
3. Provide clear descriptions of student performance that can be linked to instructional actions.
4. Be compatible with a variety of instructional models.
5. Be feasible.
6. Communicate the goals of learning to teachers and students.
7. Generate accurate, meaningful information.

(Fuchs 4-6)

In the following paragraphs, this author applies these seven criteria to the *Six Traits Model*.

The *Six Traits Model* does indeed measure an important learning outcome. The National Assessment of Educational Progress has repeatedly identified the ability to clearly express oneself through writing as a crucial learning outcome (U.S. Dept. of Ed.). Following the release of the NAEP 1998 Writing Report for the Nation, Gary W. Phillips (Acting Commissioner of the NCES) affirmed the importance of the findings as

"how well students write…is an indicator of how well they will be able to communicate and reason." Constant and consistent writing practice in all genres and in all disciplines is especially relevant in high school classrooms as students prepare for a wide variety of real-life writing tasks.

The *Six Traits Model* effectively addresses three main decision-making functions of assessment. Instructional placement decisions often need to be made as students move into new schools or even new grade levels. A direct writing assessment scored using a *Six Traits*-based analytical rubric can provide teachers with necessary information to be used in determining appropriate classes for students. Thus, the assessment can be used to help students avoid redundancy of learned skills or frustration in tackling skills too advanced (Fuchs 4). Formative evaluation allows teachers and students to monitor progress and determine whether current instruction is leading to better learning (Fuchs 4). A *Six Traits* rubric can be used frequently and easily in classrooms on a wide variety of writing to assess progress in any of the identified traits. Teachers can focus their instruction on particular traits most relevant to assigned tasks and assess the rate of progress in attaining the skills needed. The diagnostic power of the model lies in its analytical rubric. When formative evaluation points to inadequate achievement, a *Six Traits*-based analytical rubric helps to identify specific areas of weakness. With this diagnostic information, teachers can revise classroom instruction to help students improve weaknesses. Since the establishment of the *Six Traits Model*, teachers have created trait-specific lessons that are easily applicable to a variety of learning levels and situations as well as widely available to educators through the World Wide Web.

As alluded to in the previous paragraph, the *Six Traits Model* provides clear descriptions of student performance that can be linked to instructional actions. Fuchs explains, "Assessments should yield rich and highly detailed analyses of student performance that connect clearly and immediately to specific instructional decisions" (5). The criteria for each trait are clearly expressed in the scoring guide, and teachers can further identify criteria specific to assigned tasks. The common language established by *Six Traits* allows students and teachers to communicate straightforwardly in a common language about writing and to make adjustment easily for particular writing tasks. Moreover, the criteria point to instructional strategies that can be used to help students improve their writing. For example, a *Six Traits* assessment might indicate that a student struggles with organization, particularly with ordering details or events. This information will help the teacher to choose strategies such as making predictions or mapping pieces of writing so that the student begins to understand the importance of organization and how to organize his writing (Spandel 201).

Many teachers who use the *Six Traits Model* are excited about the fact that it is compatible with a variety of instructional models. Teachers already know and teach the skills that constitute good writing. Writing is still a process that involves such instructional techniques as modeling, workshopping, conducting mini-lessons in grammar and mechanical skills, and sharing in response groups. Spandel explains that the instructional strategies teachers already use "will be strengthened by [the] use of writers' vocabulary—six-trait language" (2). In other words, the *Six Traits Model*

simply uses a common language to classify the skills that most teachers already teach.

A *Six Traits*-based scoring guide is easy for teachers and students to use and interpret. Once teachers become familiar with the traits and criteria, they are able to reduce by at least half (and often more) the time spent in grading papers (Spandel 2-3). In addition, the language of the assessment is accessible to students; students can apply the traits and criteria to their writing so that improvements are made prior to handing the paper in. This skill of self-improvement will prove beneficial as students move through the educational world and into the real world.

As students, teachers, and parents apply the language and criteria of the *Six Traits Model*, they find that the model sufficiently communicates the goals of learning. The *Six Traits Analytical Scoring Guide* clearly defines the criteria for each of the traits. In turn, the traits reflect the qualities that make good writing. The guide encourages self-assessment and peer review in improving writing skills so that the guide becomes both an assessment tool and an instructional tool; "students become a part of a writing community in which their opinions about the quality of writing are frequently, actively sought" (Spandel 9). After students understand the traits of good writing, it is easier for them to apply the traits to their own writing. Similarly, after teachers and parents understand the traits of good writing, they find it easier to help students apply the traits to writing tasks. The *Six Traits Model* eliminates the mystery of good writing and establishes a fair system of assessing writing, thereby encouraging students to see a direct correlation between efforts and improvements. A

common language with which to discuss writing skills increases the ability to write effectively in a variety of real-world tasks.

As an assessment, the *Six Traits Model* generates accurate, meaningful information about writing and student achievement.    Fuchs explains, "Sound instructional decisions cannot be formulated on the basis of idiosyncratic, erroneous information" (6).    The more teachers and students use the *Six Traits Model* and familiarize themselves with the language of the traits and criteria, the more consistent their scoring.  The key, of course, is training.  Teachers have to be willing to take a little time to learn the language of the traits, to read many examples of various proficiencies in each trait, and to practice scoring prior to introducing the method to students.  Along with reliability[8], validity is crucial to the success of an assessment.  The face validity of the *Six Traits Model* is very high.  The model was crafted after extensive research into what makes good writing.  The traits reflect the qualities that both teachers and non-teachers consider important to good writing.  In composing the *Six Traits Model*, developers also kept in mind the significance of construct validity. As the traits and criteria were designed to signal the qualities of effective writing, then the assessment itself measures the skills needed for strong writing proficiency.

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[8] Reliability is further discussed in the section entitled "Limitations to the Proposal."

# CHAPTER V

## Summary

Since formal instruction in rhetoric first emerged in Greece around 450 B.C., writing has assumed an important position in most educational systems in the world. Students in ancient Athens studied classical writers such as Homer in order to hone critical thinking skills for social success. One of the most sought-after teachers in ancient Greece, Isocrates demanded intense and fastidious study of rhetoric so that students were prepared to think critically through any situation. Scholar Kathleen E. Welch claims that "Isocrates appears to have realized the centrality of writing to effective thinking" (17). Much later, in the American colonies, the precepts established by the ancient teachers of rhetoric continued to be the base for instruction in all disciplines.

At the turn of the twentieth century, however, intensive writing instruction focusing on style and form found itself isolated in the English classroom. Many students and teachers failed to recognize the importance or usefulness of effective written expression in all disciplines. English departments across America spent less time teaching standard styles, forms and conventions and more time teaching a writing process seemingly designed for quantity rather than quality. Often, individuals graduated from high school with significant deficiencies in the ability to express their ideas through writing in a standard format.

Teachers, parents, and community members began to voice great distress over the worsening of writing skills. In an attempt to address the decline of effective communication through writing, many American schools have encouraged a return of

the standard rhetorical skills of grammar, mechanics, diction and syntax in conjunction with a process approach to writing instruction. American and international businesses joined in the outcry of concern, and an increasing awareness of the importance of writing outside the English classroom emerged. As teachers of all disciplines began to implement writing assignments in their classrooms, frustrations with writing skills continued. Parents, community members, and teachers outside the English department continued to blame English teachers for deficits in writing skill. Meanwhile, students became increasingly confused by differing expectations among teachers.

In order for students and teachers to understand how to improve writing skills, they must first recognize the characteristics and criteria of good writing. Teachers often claim simply to "know" if writing is good or bad and bestow grades accordingly. Normally, the grades are of little significance as students attempt to improve their writing skills. When students receive grades lower than expected, they and their parents want to know what went wrong. All too often, the response is vague: "Your writing is unclear" or "Your writing has too many errors." This lack of constructive feedback does little to help students improve their writing. Rather than merely grading the quality of student writing, educators need to recognize the importance of providing clear and helpful feedback to student writing. Finding a common language with which to communicate the characteristics of good writing will decrease frustration and will increase understanding.

As educators and non-educators alike identify the qualities of good writing, similar descriptions surface. With this knowledge, education experts at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory devised an instructional and assessment language to

use in the teaching of writing. The *Six Traits Model* identifies six traits of good writing: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. This model provides a common language that teachers, student, parents, and community members can use to encourage effective writing. In addition, it is flexible enough to use in a wide variety of educational settings and programs as well as to enhance established English curriculum.

## Proposal for West Des Moines Valley High School

This author currently teaches English at Valley High School in West Des Moines, Iowa. Over the past two years, her colleagues and she have voiced concern with the writing abilities of students at Valley High School. As teachers continued to voice concern, the district expressed great interest in improving the writing skills of high school students. The English department recognized the severe inconsistencies within the curriculum and began to look into various writing programs and methods that would best address the needs of Valley's students, while the district committed to developing standards and benchmarks that would help guide curriculum in order to improve students' writing skills. Members of the English department examined and realigned curriculum in order to provide greater consistency and support for both teachers and students. At the same time, teachers began to explore ways to further align the curriculum while retaining a level of autonomy in individual classrooms. In addition, members of Valley's English department began to focus their classroom teaching and assessment on the four traits used by the Iowa Writing Assessment—Ideas/Content, Organization, Voice, and Conventions.

The English teachers at Valley are ready for change. After four years of developing and revising standards and benchmarks[9] and after two years of using the Iowa Writing Assessment, Valley's English teachers have expressed concern with the lack of curriculum alignment. Two teachers of the same class may have completely different curriculum. This creates confusion among both students and teachers. Only recently have teachers begun to collaborate in developing curriculum. While teaching to tests should not be encouraged, enabling students to become successful writers is critical. In order to improve writing skills, students and teachers need to understand the characteristics of good writing. A common language with which to communicate the characteristics of good writing will, in turn, boost students' efficacy in writing. After several brainstorming sessions, members of Valley's English department identified the aforementioned four traits used by the Iowa Writing Assessment as key components of the English curriculum. In addition, teachers of advanced courses added "diction" and "syntax" to the list. These six characteristics became cornerstones upon which to align curriculum.

With these six characteristics of good writing in mind, this author set out to create a common language for writing instruction and assessment that would best address not only the students' writing struggles and weak writing skills but also the teachers' frustrations and need for instructional support. In her preliminary research, she discovered the *Six Traits Model* from which came the four traits used by the Iowa Writing Assessment. The *Six Traits Model* seemed to fulfill the needs of teachers and students alike, so the district's curriculum coordinator asked this author to present her

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[9] The 2001 draft of West Des Moines Community School District's content standards and benchmarks with available performance tasks for writing can be reviewed in Appendix A.

knowledge of the model to fellow English teachers; however, this author first wanted to continue her research in the *Six Traits* in order to reassure teachers that the model was consistent with both historical and contemporary research in the teaching of writing.

Following her research, this author proposes that Valley High School English teachers adopt the language of the *Six Traits Model* as a common language of instruction and assessment in order to boost student efficacy in writing. The *Six Traits Model* both establishes a common writing language and supports research in the effective teaching of writing. Using the *Six Traits Model* will not only provide consistent reinforcement of skills learned in Valley's English classrooms but also emphasize the importance of effective written expression. In addition, a common language will assist district staff in developing and revising writing standards and benchmarks, making them coherent and applicable to curriculum. With continued practice, students will make deliberate, sophisticated choices for written expression and will transfer the skills beyond the English classroom.

So that students will benefit from the consistency of the *Six Traits* language, Valley English teachers and administrators will need develop an action plan for investing some time and resources in learning the language and in recognizing each trait. Even if the language is immediately inserted into the evaluation of district standards and benchmarks, teachers need time to connect the language to their curriculum. Like any new language, the *Six Traits* cannot be learned overnight; in fact, it would be beneficial for Valley High School to plan a three-year transition process. Teachers need time to practice the language and to practice scoring with *Six Traits* rubrics. If teachers don't understand or find usefulness in the language, then they will

be reluctant or unable to explain the language to students. Teachers also need support in incorporating the language of *Six Traits* into their current curriculum. This can be accomplished efficiently through departmental training sessions during scheduled teacher in-services and department meetings.

Training sessions can be organized in various ways; however, English teachers need to find value in learning the *Six Traits* language. In an introductory training session, which would ideally be a one-day session, a small amount of time should be set aside for teachers to list the qualities they look for in good writing. Of course, the desired qualities may depend upon the type of writing; however, teachers should be encouraged to write down as many qualities as possible. In many cases, the list will contain several terms for a single idea; therefore, teachers should attempt to consolidate similar terms into a general category. Then, the trainer should ask teachers to compare the terms on their lists to the terms used in the *Six Traits Model*. Some teachers may be surprised to learn the wide variety of terms used to refer to a single idea. At this point, the trainer should point out that with so many different terms referring to the same general ideas, students often become confused. This activity will help to emphasize the need for a common language. Next, the trainer should provide a brief explanation for each of the *Six Traits*. Handouts of either NWREL's scoring guide or Vicki Spandel's guide should be provided. Both five-point scoring guides can be found in Appendices B and C. A brief discussion of the alignment between the *Six Traits* and the Iowa Writing Assessment as well as the district's developing standards and benchmarks for writing should follow. Then, teachers should collaboratively begin reading and scoring sample papers; however, teachers should focus on only one trait at

a time. Sample papers with suggested scores may be found in Spandel's *Creating Writers, 3rd Edition* or on NWREL's website (http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/ scoringpractice.asp?odelay=3&d=1). Teachers should not be pushed to come to a consensus score for each trait; rather, a discussion should ensue to clarify the criteria for each trait. The trainer can provide further tips on scoring each trait.

In subsequent training sessions, teachers should continue scoring practice in order to reinforce the *Six Traits* language. After the first session, teachers should score sample papers individually, then discuss the scores collectively. Also, teachers should be encouraged to bring in their own student samples so that they can begin to understand how the *Six Traits Model* would apply to their own curriculum. When teachers begin to feel comfortable with the language, the trainer should then help teachers apply the traits to their own curriculum and provide suggestions for teaching the traits to students. Teachers need continuous practice using the *Six Traits* so that they can understand how the language works and how the language can help students. Teachers can collaborate to create rubrics using all or part of the *Six Traits* for existing writing assignments. The trainer should remind teachers that criteria can be modified as needed to fit particular assignments as long as the modifications fit under the indicated trait. The trainer should also emphasize the importance of explaining the *Six Traits Model* to students and to parents and of connecting the assessment to student learning.

Just as the teachers began by assessing just one trait at a time, so should students become familiar with just one trait at a time. And just as the teachers read many sample papers, students should also be exposed to many examples of writing

that exemplify various proficiencies of each trait. After completing the first year of training sessions, teachers should begin incorporating the *Six Traits* language in their own classrooms. In the beginning, the English teachers will most likely spend more time training students to understand the *Six Traits* language; however, as more and more teachers use the language, less instructional time will be required. Students will not only recognize the language but also readily apply the traits to writing assignments outside their English classrooms.

Some teachers might experience difficulties in implementing the *Six Traits* language into particular assignments because one or more traits might not be applicable. This concern should be addressed in training sessions by showing teachers how the method can be adapted to various assignments. The *Six Traits Scoring Guide* is not a static rubric; it is a dynamic tool that can be modified to fit a variety of situations.

**Limitations to the Proposal**

In order for a common instructional language to prove useful for Valley High School English teachers, teachers must reach a consensus on the language used. This author proposes the language of the *Six Traits*—Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, Conventions—based upon previous discussions and identified skills. After a year of department meetings and in-service sessions, Valley's English teachers concurred that the *Six Traits* accurately described the vast majority of teacher expectations, correlated with the Iowa Writing Assessment used by the district, and matched projected evaluation of the district's standards and benchmarks.

This author realizes, however, that changes in curriculum and assessment occur constantly. In fact, West Des Moines Community School District has changed its writing

standards, benchmarks, performance tasks, and evaluation procedures each of the last four years. With this in mind, the language of the *Six Traits* may prove to be merely a catalyst for the creation of a common language of instruction that best fits the needs of our district and our students. The importance lies in the recognition of the need for a common language of instruction and assessment and for an aligned curriculum that matches instruction to assessment.

Although this paper focuses on the use of a common instructional language to increase student efficacy in writing, this author would be remiss to dismiss issues concerning reliability of assessment. The use of holistic, primary trait, and analytical scoring guides can result in greater bias than more objective, multiple-choice tests. In his text *Teaching and Assessing Writing,* Edward M. White cautions teachers "to be alert to the uncertain reliability of holistic scores, in order to ensure that these scores will not be misused, particularly when they are used alone to damage students" (288).

Reliability ensures fair and consistent evaluation of performance. Thus, scoring reliability is critical to the establishment of a common language of instruction and assessment. In order to reach such reliability, teachers should engage in continuous practice scoring. As teachers learn the traits and the basic criteria, multiple exemplary papers should be used to illustrate the top score in each trait. Then, sample anchor papers should be read to demonstrate each level of criteria within each trait. After teachers learn to recognize and score the criteria of the *Six Traits* during staff in-service days, the department should meet on a regular basis, as often as twice a month, to practice using the language to score papers. Since time is limited during department meetings, teachers might choose to focus on one trait per meeting.

Teachers and trainers should also focus on interrater reliability so that the common language will be assessed equally among the English classes at Valley. In his 1974 text *Measuring Growth in English,* Paul B. Diederich suggests "a reliability of .80 in the measure (or series of measures) of an important objective as adequate for practical decisions in the ordinary course of schoolwork" (2). Many members of Valley's English department have scored student papers for the Iowa Writing Assessment and are familiar with the process used to achieve reliability.[10] Diederich encourages staff grading to increase reliability in students' grades. He recommends that teachers avoid putting grades on "practice papers" assigned as homework; instead, teachers should praise effusively what students do well and offer "one modest suggestion for improvement" (20). Final grades are dependent upon staff grading; two teachers grade each student's paper independently. If the grades should differ more than one grade point, then a third, highly experienced teacher would grade the paper. This third grade would replace whichever grade was farthest from it, or the grade nearest to the mean would be discarded (Diederich 20). At Valley High School, however, staff grading is not feasible due to time and assignment constraints; therefore, teachers should participate in constant practice and discussion to increase reliability of scoring.

Despite attempts to increase interrater reliability, several factors can and do influence scoring. When teachers know the author of a paper or the capability of the writer, then grades often are affected accordingly. In order to reduce rater bias, Diederich suggests that random numbers replace student names prior to scoring (13). At Valley, students are assigned numbers as a form of identification. In grading essays,

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[10] The method used to achieve interrater reliability on the Iowa Writing Assessment was discussed briefly in chapter one.

this author asks that students identify their papers with student identification numbers in order to reduce possible bias when grading. Also, students' overall grades should not be based upon essays. If the *Six Traits Scoring Guide* is used to assess essays, other forms of objective assessment should be included in the overall grades.

**Conclusion**

Effective written expression plays an increasingly important role in one's personal, social, and professional success; therefore, schools need to take responsibility for giving students the necessary tools to write well. A common language of instruction and assessment can benefit all involved in the acquisition of effective writing skills. A high school that uses the common language of *Six Traits* can consistently reinforce standard writing skills and can teach students how to apply the skills to a variety of purposes and modes. When teachers use the common language of *Six Traits*, they not only clarify their understanding of effective written expression (perhaps even improving their own writing) but also efficiently explain the purpose and expectations of their writing assignments to students.

Most important, the common language of the *Six Traits* encourages teachers, students, parents, and community members to talk about writing. This discourse leads to greater understanding of how written expression functions outside of the English classroom and to the realization that good writing counts all the time. Granted, skillful writing cannot be reduced to a set formula or absolute recipe; however, all skillful writers manage to incorporate successfully basic qualities of good writing.

# APPENDIX A

## West Des Moines Community School District
## Content Standards & Benchmarks with Performance Tasks: Writing
## Grades 9-12 (2001 Draft)

### STANDARD #1
Students gather and organize information.  All students will organize and analyze information for relevance and reliability for use in writing.

### Benchmark 9-12.1
All students will critically evaluate multiple sources and select relevant information in formulating a purposeful response.

### Performance Task
Students will research the answer to a question that is meaningful to them.  The answer will be written in essay format and must incorporate information from a minimum of three, varied reliable sources (both print and electronic).  The essay must include a bibliography.

### Evaluation
Teachers may set up this paper in a variety of ways to fit their Fundamentals of Writing course.  The rubric for the project may be individualized, but somewhere on the rubric, the following criteria must be evaluated in the manner shown below.

- Student's sources are reliable.
  1      2'      3      4
- Student incorporated information from sources in logical manner.
  1      2      3      4
- Student uses a variety of sources (variety = 3 sources, both electronic and print).
  1      2      3      4
- Student includes information that is relevant to topic of essay.
  1      2      3      4

  (1=statement is not true; 2=statement is true some of the time; 3=statement is true but student could still grow in depth of understanding sources and their relationship to writing; 4=statement is true, and student is complete and thorough)

### STANDARD #2
Students engage in the writing process.  All students will plan, write, and revise while identifying personal strengths and weaknesses in writing.

### Benchmark 9-12.1
All students will practice the writing process and will seek feedback from others to improve writing.

### Performance Task
Students will develop a writing portfolio emphasizing the writing process while recognizing personal strengths and weaknesses.  In the portfolio, students will include original drafts; self, peer, and adult evaluations; rewritten drafts; required reflections, and a final draft.

# Evaluation
## Writing Process Rubric

### Portfolio contains all steps of the writing process

4      Portfolio contains: all drafts from which to choose; choice statement/reflection; required rewrites; self, peer, & adult evaluations; evidence of proofreading; final draft; final reflection.

3      Portfolio lacks ONE of the following: all drafts from which to choose; choice statement/reflection; required rewrites; self, peer, & adult evaluations; evidence of proofreading; final draft; final reflection.

2      Portfolio lacks TWO of the following: all drafts from which to choose; choice statement/reflection; required rewrites; self, peer, & adult evaluations; evidence of proofreading; final draft; final reflection.

1      Portfolio lacks THREE OR MORE of the following: all drafts from which to choose; choice statement/reflection; required rewrites; self, peer, & adult evaluations; evidence of proofreading; final draft; final reflection.

### Initial reflections identify personal strengths and weaknesses

4      Choice statement/reflection shows critical evaluation of drafts as well as specific identification of writer's strengths and weaknesses as seen in the chosen draft.

3      Choice statement/reflection shows critical evaluation of drafts as well as specific identification of some strengths and weaknesses as seen in the chosen draft.

2      Choice statement/reflection shows evaluation of drafts as well as specific identification of a few strengths and weaknesses as seen in the chosen draft.

1      Choice statement/reflection shows little attempt to evaluate drafts as well as little to no identification of strengths and weaknesses as seen in the chosen draft.

### Rewritten drafts show growth through application of feedback

4      Drafts show thoughtful consideration and application of feedback from evaluations in order to improve the areas of content and mechanics.

3      Drafts show some consideration and application of feedback from evaluations in order to improve partially the areas of content and mechanics.

2      Drafts show little consideration and application of feedback from evaluations and only improve the area of mechanics.

1      Drafts show no consideration or application of feedback from evaluations and no improvement in the areas of content and mechanics.

### Final reflection shows critical thinking and evaluation of writing process

4      Final reflection contains an accurate and thoughtful analysis of the writing process, identifies personal improvements, and discusses how to use the process in future tasks.

3      Final reflection contains a somewhat accurate and thoughtful analysis of the writing process, identifies personal improvements, and briefly discusses how to use the process in future tasks.

2      Final reflection contains a shallow analysis of the writing process, identifies only a few personal improvements, and vaguely refers to the use of the process in future tasks.

1      Final reflection contains an incomplete analysis of the writing process, fails to identify personal improvements, and does not discuss the use of the process in future tasks.

# STANDARD #3
Students will write for a variety of purposes and audiences. All students will demonstrate an understanding of purpose and audience in their writing.

## Benchmark 9-12.1
All students will write in a variety of genres to address an audience and achieve a purpose.

## Performance Task
None available in 2001.

**Evaluation**
None available in 2001.

**STANDARD #4**
Students will demonstrate an understanding of the principles of language.

**Benchmark 9-12.1**
All students will identify and appropriately use conventions of English.

**Performance Task**
Students will take the "Correctness of Expression" section of the ITEDS.

**Evaluation**
Eighty percent of students will be above the national average on the "Correctness of Expression" section of the ITEDS.

# APPENDIX B

# NWREL's 6+1 Traits™
## Of Analytic Writing Assessment Scoring Guide
## Criteria

## IDEAS AND CONTENT

**5** *This paper is clear and focused. It holds the reader's attention. Relevant anecdotes and details enrich the central theme.*
   A.     The topic is narrow and manageable.
   B.     Relevant, telling, quality details give the reader important information that goes beyond the obvious or predictable.
   C.     Reasonably accurate details are present to support the main ideas.
   D.     The writer seems to be writing from knowledge or experience; the ideas are fresh and original.
   E.     The reader's questions are anticipated and answered.
   F.     Insight—an understanding of life and a knack for picking out what is significant—is an indicator of high level performance, though not required.

**3** *The writer is beginning to define the topic, even though development is still basic or general.*
   A.     The topic is fairly broad; however, you can see where the writer is headed.
   B.     Support is attempted, but doesn't go far enough yet in fleshing out the key issues or story line.
   C.     Ideas are reasonably clear, though they may not be detailed, personalized accurate, or expanded enough to show indepth understanding or a strong sense of purpose.
   D.     The writer seems to be drawing on knowledge or experience, but has difficulty going from general observations to specifics.
   E.     The reader is left with questions. More information is needed to "fill in the blanks."
   F.     The writer generally stays on the topic but does not develop a clear theme. The writer has not yet focused the topic past the obvious.

**1** *As yet, the paper has no clear sense of purpose or central theme. To extract meaning from the text, the reader must make inferences based on sketchy or missing details. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:*
   A.     The writer is **still in search of a topic**, brainstorming, or has not yet decided what the main idea of the piece will be.
   B.     Information is **limited** or **unclear** or the **length is not adequate** for development.
   C.     The idea is a **simple restatement** of the topic or an **answer** to the question with little or no attention to detail.
   D.     The writer has **not begun to define the topic** in a meaningful, personal way.
   E.     **Everything seems as important as everything else**; the reader has a hard time sifting out what is important.
   F.     The text may be **repetitious**, or may read like a collection of **disconnected, random thoughts** with no discernable point.

## ORGANIZATION

**5** *The organization enhances and showcases the central idea or theme. The order, structure, or presentation of information is compelling and moves the reader through the text.*
   A.     An **inviting introduction** draws the reader in; a **satisfying conclusion** leaves the reader with a sense of closure and resolution.
   B.     **Thoughtful transitions** clearly show how ideas connect.
   C.     Details seem to fit where they're placed; **sequencing is logical** and **effective**.
   D.     **Pacing is well controlled**; the writer knows when to slow down and elaborate, and when to pick up the pace and move on.
   E.     The **title**, if desired, is **original** and captures the central theme of the piece.
   F.     Organization **flows so smoothly** the reader hardly thinks about it; the choice of structure matches the **purpose** and **audience**.

**3**    *The organizational structure is strong enough to move the reader through the text without too much confusion.*

A.    The paper has a **recognizable introduction and conclusion**. The introduction may not create a strong sense of anticipation; the conclusion may not tie-up all loose ends.

B.    **Transitions often work well**; at other times, connections between ideas are fuzzy.

C.    **Sequencing** shows **some logic**, but not under control enough that it consistently supports the ideas. In fact, sometimes it is so predictable and rehearsed that the **structure takes attention away from the content.**

D.    **Pacing is fairly well controlled**, though the writer sometimes lunges ahead too quickly or spends too much time on details that do not matter.

E.    A **title** (if desired) **is present**, although it may be uninspired or an obvious restatement of the prompt or topic.

F.    The **organization sometimes supports the main point or storyline**; at other times, the reader feels an urge to slip in a transition or move things around.

**1**    *The writing lacks a clear sense of direction. Ideas, details, or events seem strung together in a loose or random fashion; there is no identifiable internal structure. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:*

A.    There is **no real lead** to set-up what follows, **no real conclusion** to wrap things up.

B.    Connections between ideas are **confusing** or not even present.

C.    **Sequencing needs** lots and lots of **work**.

D.    **Pacing feels awkward**; the writer slows to a crawl when the reader wants to get on with it, and vice versa.

E.    **No title is present** (if requested) or, if present, **does not match** well with the content.

F.    Problems with organization make it **hard for the reader to get a grip** on the main point or story line.

## VOICE

**5**    *The writer speaks directly to the reader in a way that is individual, compelling and engaging. The writer crafts the writing with an awareness and respect for the audience and the purpose for writing.*

A.    The tone of the writing **adds interest** to the message and is **appropriate for the purpose and audience.**

B.    The reader feels a **strong interaction** with the writer, sensing the **person behind the words.**

C.    The writer **takes a risk** by revealing who he or she is consistently throughout the piece.

D.    **Expository or persuasive** writing reflects a **strong commitment** to the topic by showing **why the reader needs to know this** and why he or she should care.

E.    **Narrative** writing is **honest, personal, and engaging** and makes you **think about, and react to**, the author's ideas and point of view.

**3**    *The writer seems sincere but not fully engaged or involved. The result is pleasant or even personable, but not compelling.*

A.    The writer seems aware of an audience but discards personal insights in favor of obvious generalities.

B.    The writing communicates in an earnest, pleasing, yet safe manner.

C.    Only one or two moments here or there intrigue, delight, or move the reader. These places may emerge strongly for a line or two, but quickly fade away.

D.    Expository or persuasive writing lacks consistent engagement with the topic to build credibility.

E.    Narrative writing is reasonably sincere, but doesn't reflect unique or individual perspective on the topic.

**1**    *The writer seems indifferent, uninvolved, or distanced from the topic and/or the audience. As a result, the paper reflects more than one of the following problems:*

A.    The writer is **not concerned with the audience**. The writer's style is a **complete mismatch** for the intended reader or the writing is **so short** that little is accomplished beyond introducing the topic.

B.    The writer speaks in a kind of **monotone** that flattens all potential highs or lows of the message.

C.    The writing is **humdrum and "risk-free."**

D.    The writing is **lifeless or mechanical**; depending on the topic, it may be overly technical or jargonistic.

E.    The development of the topic is **so limited** that **no point of view is present**—zip, zero, zilch, nada.

## WORD CHOICE

**5** *Words convey the intended message in a precise, interesting, and natural way. The words are powerful and engaging.*

A.    Words are **specific** and **accurate**. It is easy to understand just what the writer means.
B.    **Striking words and phrases** often catch the reader's eye and linger in the reader's mind.
C.    Language and phrasing is **natural, effective,** and **appropriate** for the audience.
D.    **Lively verbs** add energy while **specific nouns** and **modifiers** add depth.
E.    Choices in language **enhance** the **meaning** and **clarify** understanding.

**3** *The language is functional, even if it lacks much energy. It is easy to figure out the writer's meaning on a general level.*

A.    Words are **adequate and correct in a general sense**, and they support the meaning by not getting in the way.
B.    Familiar **words and phrases communicate** but rarely capture the reader's imagination.
C.    **Attempts at colorful language** show a willingness to stretch and grow but sometimes reach beyond the audience (thesaurus overload!).
D.    Despite a **few successes**, the writing is marked by **passive verbs, everyday nouns**, and **mundane modifiers**.
E.    The words and phrases are **functional** with only **one or two fine moments**.
F.    The words may be **refined in a couple of places**, but the language looks more like **the first thing that popped into the writer's mind.**

**1** *The writer demonstrates a limited vocabulary or has not searched for words to convey specific meaning.*

A.    Words are so **nonspecific and distracting** that only a **very limited meaning** comes through.
B.    Problems with language **leave** the **reader wondering**. Many of the **words** just **don't work** in this piece.
C.    Audience has not been considered. **Language is used incorrectly** making the message secondary to the misfires with the words.
D.    **Limited vocabulary** and/or **misused parts of speech** seriously impair understanding.
E.    Words and phrases are so **unimaginative** and **lifeless** that they detract from the meaning.
F.    **Jargon or clichés** distract or mislead. **Redundancy** may distract the reader.

## SENTENCE FLUENCY

**5** *The writing has an easy flow, rhythm, and cadence. Sentences are well built, with strong and varied structure that invites expressive oral reading.*

A.    Sentences are constructed in a way that underscores and enhances the **meaning**.
B.    Sentences **vary in length as well as structure**. Fragments, if used, add style. Dialogue, if present, sounds natural.
C.    **Purposeful** and **varied sentence beginnings** add variety and energy.
D.    The use of **creative and appropriate connectives** between sentences and thoughts shows how each relates to, and builds upon, the one before it.
E.    The writing has **cadence**; the writer has thought about the sound of the words as well as the meaning. The first time you read it aloud is a breeze.

**3** *The text hums along with a steady beat, but tends to be more pleasant or businesslike than musical, more mechanical than fluid.*

A.    Although sentences may not seem artfully crafted or musical, **they get the job done in a routine fashion**.
B.    Sentences are **usually constructed correctly**; they **hang together**; they are **sound**.
C.    **Sentence beginnings** are not ALL alike; **some variety is attempted**.
D.    The reader sometimes has to **hunt for clues** (e.g., connecting words and phrases like *however, therefore, naturally, after a while, on the other hand, to be specific, for example, next, first of all, later, but as it turned out, although,* etc.) that show how sentences interrelate.
E.    Parts of the text invite expressive oral reading; others may be stiff, awkward, choppy, or gangly.

**1**   *The reader had to practice quite a bit in order to give this paper a fair interpretive reading. The writing reflects more than one of the following problems:*

A.   Sentences are **choppy, incomplete, rambling or awkward**; they need work. **Phrasing does not sound natural.** The patterns may create a sing-song rhythm, or a chop-chop cadence that lulls the reader to sleep.

B.   There is little to **no "sentence sense"** present. Even if this piece was flawlessly edited, the sentences would not hang together.

C.   Many **sentences begin the same way**—and may follow the same patterns (e.g., *subject-verb-object*) in a monotonous pattern.

D.   **Endless connectives** *(and, and so, but then, because, and then,* etc.) or a **complete lack of connectives** create a massive jumble of language.

E.   The text **does not invite expressive oral reading.**

## CONVENTIONS

**5**   *The writer demonstrates a good grasp of standard writing conventions (e.g., spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, usage, paragraphing) and uses conventions effectively to enhance readability. Errors tend to be so few that just minor touch-ups would get this piece ready to publish.*

A.   **Spelling is generally correct**, even on more difficult words.

B.   The **punctuation is accurate,** even creative, and guides the reader through the text.

C.   A thorough understanding and consistent application of **capitalization** skills are present.

D.   **Grammar and usage are correct** and contribute to clarity and style.

E.   **Paragraphing tents to be sound** and reinforces the organizational structure.

F.   The writer **may manipulate conventions** for stylistic effect—and it works! The piece is very close to being **ready to publish.**

> GRADES 7 AND UP ONLY: The writing is sufficiently complex to allow the writer to show skill in using a wide range of conventions. For writers at younger ages, the writing shows control over these conventions that are grade/age appropriate.

**3**   *The writer shows reasonable control over a limited range of standard writing conventions. Conventions are sometimes handled well and enhance readability; at other times, errors are distracting and impair readability.*

A.   **Spelling** is usually **correct or reasonably phonetic on common words**, but more difficult words are problematic.

B.   **End punctuation is usually correct**; internal punctuation (*commas, apostrophes, semicolons, dashes, colons, parentheses*) is sometimes missing/wrong.

C.   **Most words are capitalized correctly**; control over more sophisticated capitalization skills may be spotty.

D.   **Problems with grammar or usage are not serious** enough to distort meaning but may not be correct or accurately applied all of the time.

E.   **Paragraphing is attempted** but may run together or begin in the wrong places.

F.   **Moderate editing** (a little of this, a little of that) would be required to polish the text for publication.

**1**   *Errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, usage, and grammar and/or paragraphing repeatedly distract the reader and make the text difficult to read. The writing reflects more than one of the following problems:*

A.   **Spelling errors are frequent**; even on common words.

B.   **Punctuation** (including terminal punctuation) is often **missing or incorrect.**

C.   **Capitalization** is **random** and only the easiest rules show awareness of correct use.

D.   **Errors in grammar or usage are very noticeable,** frequent, and affect meaning.

E.   **Paragraphing is missing, irregular, or so frequent** (every sentence) that it has no relationship to the organizational structure of the text.

F.   The reader must **read once to decode,** then again for meaning. **Extensive editing** (virtually every line) would be required to polish the text for publication.

## PRESENTATION (OPTIONAL)

**5**   *The form and presentation of the text enhances the ability for the reader to understand and connect with the message. It is pleasing to the eye.*

A.   If handwritten (either cursive or printed) the **slant is consistent**, letters are clearly formed, **spacing is uniform** between words, and the text is easy to read.

B.   If word-processed, there is **appropriate use of fonts and font sizes** which invites the reader into the text.

C.   The use of **white space** on the page (spacing, margins, etc.) allows the intended audience to easily focus on the text and message without distractions. There is just the right amount of balance of white space and text on the page. The formatting suits the purpose for writing

D.   The use of a **title, side heads, page numbering, bullets,** and evidence of correct use of a style sheet (when appropriate) makes it easy for the reader to access the desired information and text. These markers allow the hierarchy of information to be clear to the reader.

E.   When appropriate to the purpose and audience, there is **effective integration of text and illustrations, charts, graphs, maps, tables, etc.** There is clear alignment between the text and visuals. The visuals support and clarify important information or key points made in the text.

**3**   *The writer's message is understandable in this format.*

A.   **Handwriting is readable**, although there may be **discrepancies in letter shape and form, slant, and spacing** that may make some words or passages easier to read than others.

B.   **Experimentation with fonts and font sizes** is successful in some places, but begins to get fussy and cluttered in others. The **effect is not consistent** throughout the text.

C.   While margins may be present, **some text may crowd the edges**. Consistent spacing is applied, although a different choice may make text more accessible (e.g., single, double, or triple spacing).

D.   Although some markers are present (titles, numbering, bullets, side heads, etc.), they are not used to their fullest potential as a guide for the reader to access the greatest meaning from the text.

E.   An **attempt is made to integrate visuals** and the text although the connections may be limited.

**1**   *The reader receives a garbled message due to problems relating to the presentation of the text.*

A.   Because the letters are irregularly slanted, formed inconsistently, or incorrectly, and the spacing is unbalanced or not even present, it is **very difficult to read and understand the text**.

B.   The writer has gone **wild with multiple fonts and font sizes.** It is a major distraction to the reader.

C.   The **spacing is random and confusing** to the reader. There may be little or no white spaces on the page.

D.   **Lack of markers** (title, page numbering, bullets, side heads, etc.) leave the reader wondering how one section connects to another and why the text is organized in this manner on the page.

E.   The visuals do not support or further illustrate key ideas presented in the text. They may be **misleading, indecipherable, or too complex** to be understood.

Rubric and criteria extracted from *An Introduction to the 6+1 Traits™ for Writing Assessment and Instruction.* Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 9-15.

# APPENDIX C

# Vicki Spandel's adaptation of NWREL's
## Analytic Writing Assessment Scoring Guide
## Criteria for Personal/Creative Writing

## IDEAS

**5**   *The paper is clear, focused, purposeful, and enhanced by significant detail that captures a reader's interest.*
- The paper creates a vivid impression, makes a point, or tells a whole story, without bogging down in trivia.
- Thoughts are clearly expressed and directly relevant to a key issue, theme, or story line.
- Information is based on experience or investigation of a topic and goes beyond common knowledge.
- Carefully selected examples, rich details and/or anecdotes bring the topic to life and lend the writing authenticity.
- The reader is NOT left with important unanswered questions.

**3**   *The writer has made a solid beginning in defining a key issue, making a point, creating an impression, or sketching out a story line. More focus and detail will breathe life into this writing.*
- It is easy to see where the writer is headed, even if some telling details are needed to complete the picture.
- The reader can grasp the big picture but yearns for elaboration
- General observations and common knowledge are as plentiful as insights or "close-up" details.
- There *may* be *too* much information; it would help if the writer would trim the deadwood.
- As a whole, the piece hangs together and makes a clear general statement or tells a recountable story.

**1**   *The writing is sketchy or loosely focused. The reader must make many inferences to grasp the writer's main point. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:*
- The writer still needs to clarify the topic.
- The writer has assembled a loose collection of factlets that do not, as yet, have any real focus.
- Everything seems as important as everything else.
- It is hard to identify the main theme or story: What is this writer's main point or purpose?

## ORGANIZATION

**5**   *The order, presentation, or internal structure of the piece is compelling and moves the reader purposefully through the text.*
- The organization showcases the central theme or story line.
- Details seem to fit right where they are placed, even when the writer hits the reader with a surprise.
- An inviting lead draws the reader in; a satisfying conclusion helps bring the reader's thing to closure.
- Pacing feels natural and effective; the writer knows just when to linger over details and when to get moving.
- Organization flows so smoothly the reader does not need to think about it.

**3**   *The organizational structure guides the reader through the text without undue confusion. The route may be circuitous, but the reader can see where this writer is headed.*
- Sequencing seems reasonably appropriate.
- Placement of details is workable, though sometimes predictable.
- The introduction and conclusion are recognizable and functional.
- Transitions are present but may sound formulaic: e.g., *My first point...My second point...*
- Structure may be *so* dominant that it overshadows both ideas and voice; it's impossible to stop thinking about it!

**1** *Ideas, details, or events seem loosely connected—or even unrelated. It is very hard to see where this writer is headed. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:*

- The writer skips randomly from point to point, leaving the reader scrambling to follow.
- No real lead sets up what follows.
- No real conclusion wraps things up.
- Missing or unclear transitions force the reader to make big leaps.
- It is difficult to see any real pattern or structure in the writing.

## VOICE

**5** *The writer's energy and passion for the subject drive the writing, making the text lively, expressive, and engaging.*

- The tone and flavor of the piece fit the topic, purpose, and audience well.
- Clearly, the writing belongs to this writer and no other
- The writer "speaks" to the reader in a way that makes him/her feel like an insider.
- Narrative text is open and honest.
- Expository or persuasive text is provocative, lively, and designed to prompt thinking.

**3** *The writer seems sincere and willing to communicate with the reader on a functional, if somewhat distant, level.*

- The writer has not quite found his or her voice but is experimenting—and the result is pleasant and sincere, if not highly individual.
- Moments here and there snag the reader's attention, but the writer holds passion and spontaneity in check.
- The writer often seems reluctant to reveal him- or herself, and is "there" briefly—then gone.
- Though clearly aware of an audience, the writer only occasionally speaks right to the audience.
- The writer often seems right on the verge of sharing something truly interesting—but then pulls back as if thinking better of it.

**1** *The writer seems distanced from topic, audience, or both; as a result, the text may lack life, spirit, or energy. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:*

- The writer does not seem to reach out to the audience or to anticipate their interests and needs.
- Though it may communicate on a functional level, the writing takes no risks and does not involve or move the reader.
- The writer does not yet seem sufficiently at home with the topic to personalize it for the reader.

## WORD CHOICE

**5** *Precise, vivid, natural language paints a strong, clear, and complete picture in the reader's mind.*

- The writer's message is remarkably clear and easy to interpret.
- Phrasing is original—even memorable—yet the language is never overdone.
- Lively verbs lend the writing power. Precise nouns and modifiers make it easy to picture what the writer is saying.
- Striking words or phrases linger in the writer's memory, often prompting connections, memories, reflective thoughts, or insights.

**3** *The language communicates in a routine manner; it gets the job done.*

- Most words are correct and adequate, even if not striking.
- Energetic verbs or memorable phrases occasionally strike a spark, leaving the reader hungry for more.
- Familiar words and phrases give the text an "old comfortable couch" kind of feel.
- In one or two places, language may be overdone—but at least it isn't flat.
- Attempts at colorful language are full of promise, even when they lack restraint or control

**1**    *The writer either over-writes, smothering the message, or struggles with a limited vocabulary, searching for words or phrases to convey the intended meaning. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:*

- Vague words and phrases (She was *nice...It* was *wonderful...*The new budget *had impact.*) convey only the most general sorts of messages.
- Redundancy is noticeable—even distracting.
- Clichés and tired phrases pop up with disappointing frequency.
- Words are used incorrectly ("The bus *impelled* into the hotel.")
- The writer overloads the text with ponderous, overdone, or jargonistic language that is tough to penetrate.

## SENTENCE FLUENCY

**5**    *An easy flow and rhythm combined with sentence sense and clarity make this text a delight to read aloud.*

- Sentences are well crafted, with a strong and varied structure that invites expressive oral reading.
- Purposeful sentence beginnings show how each sentence relates to and builds on the one before it.
- The writing has cadence, as if the writer hears the beat in his or her head.
- Sentences vary in both structure and length, making the reading pleasant and never monotonous.
- Fragments, if used, add to the style.

**3**    *The text hums along with a steady beat. It's easy enough to read aloud, though somewhat difficult to read with great expression.*

- Sentences are grammatical and fairly easy to get through, given a little rehearsal.
- Graceful, natural phrasing intermingles with more mechanical structure.
- Some variation in length and structure enhances fluency.
- Some purposeful sentence beginnings help the reader make sentence-to-sentence connections.

**1**    *A fair interpretive oral reading of this text takes practice. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:*

- Irregular or unusual word patterns make sentences hard to decipher, or make it hard to tell where one sentence ends and the next begins.
- Ideas hooked together by numerous connectives (*and...but...so...then...because...*) create one gangly, endless "sentence."
- Short, choppy sentences bump the reader through the text.
- Repetitive sentence patterns grow monotonous.
- Transitional phrases are so repetitive they become distracting.
- The reader must often pause and reread to get the meaning.

## CONVENTIONS

**5**    *The writer has excellent control over a wide range of standard writing conventions and uses them with accuracy and (when appropriate) creativity and style to enhance meaning.*

- Errors are so few and so minor that a reader can easily over look them unless searching for them specifically. Highly skilled writers may "play" with conventions for special effect.
- The text appears clean, edited, and polished.
- Older writers (grade 6 and up) create text of sufficient length and complexity to demonstrate control of a range of conventions appropriate for their age and experience.
- The text is easy to mentally process; there is nothing to distract or confuse a reader.
- Only light touch-ups would be required to polish the text for publication.

**3**   *The writer shows reasonable control over the most widely used writing conventions and uses them with fair consistency to create text that is adequately readable.*
- There are enough errors to distract an attentive reader *somewhat*; however, errors do not seriously impair readability or obscure meaning.
- It is easy enough for an experienced reader to get through the text without stumbling, but the writing clearly needs polishing. It's definitely not "ready for press."
- Moderate editing would be required to get this text ready for publication.
- The paper reads like an "on its way" rough draft.

**1**   *The writer demonstrates limited control even over widely used writing conventions. The text reflects at least one of these problems:*
- Errors are sufficiently frequent and/or serious as to be distracting; it is hard for the reader to focus on ideas, organization, or voice.
- Errors in spelling, punctuation or grammar cause the reader to pause, decode, or re-read to make sense of the text.
- Extensive editing would be required to prepare this text for publication.

# Vicki Spandel's 6-point scale criteria

## IDEAS

**6**   *The paper is not only clear, but compelling. It offers a unique perspective or point of view unlike others. It is marked by insight and indepth understanding of the topic that affects the reader's own thinking and reflects experience, research and/or careful thought.*
- The paper makes the reader think of the topic in a whole new way.
- Thoughts are expressed with both clarity and purpose; the writer takes the reader on a journey of understanding.
- Anecdotes, details and examples keep the reader continually informed and/or entertained.
- The reader feels enlightened, satisfied, stretched and enriched by the experience of reading. "I wouldn't have missed it," is the internal response.

## ORGANIZATION

**6**   *The order seems so natural and right that it is difficult to imagine the information presented in any other format. It is easy to discover the writer's pattern upon close investigation, but it is so smoothly embedded within the text that it tends to go unnoticed.*
- The organizational pattern fits the topic perfectly; it enhances both the reader's understanding and enjoyment of the text.
- The beginning has a "just right" feel—as if the writer had written many leads before settling on this one. "I can't improve upon it," is the reader's response.
- Transitions within and between paragraphs take the writer by the hand from point to point—but never stand out like road signs.
- Sequencing is never predictable, but it works. The organization leads the reader right to the main points and answers questions the reader didn't even anticipate.
- The conclusion is often the highlight of the piece—unexpected and enlightening, it builds a bridge to the next level of thought.

## VOICE

**6**   *The voice is so clear, so individual, that the reader feels he/she could recognize another piece by the same writer without difficulty.*
- "I *must* read this aloud to someone," is the reader's immediate response.
- The text is passionate without being overdone. Restraint keeps the sense of tension and feeling high; the text never dissolves into sentimentality.
- The reader feels moved enough to pause momentarily and reflect on the writing.
- Voice is used purposefully to enhance meaning.
- It is impossible (for all but the most indifferent of readers) to put this piece down.

## WORD CHOICE

**6**

*The language and phrasing are so right for the piece that the reader feels compelled to read the paper—or parts of it—more than once, just to enjoy the way the writer puts things.*

- "I wish I'd written that," is the reader's frequent response.
- Every word "tells"—which is to say, carries its own weight. There is no filler whatsoever.
- Numerous words and phrases are quotable.
- The reader wants to s-l-o-w down, savoring each line.
- The writer has his/her own way with words; no clichés, no echoes from others mar the beauty of this original crafting.

## FLUENCY

**6**

*This text is easy to read with maximum expression and inflection that brings out every nuance of meaning. It virtually dances—like a good, lively script from a film or play.*

- Nearly *every* sentence begins in a new way, and the whole sounds completely natural—never forced.
- The text begs to be read aloud; it is one you'd choose to illustrate the concept of fluency.
- Prose may seem, at times, to dissolve into poetry; it's that lyrical.
- Variations in sentence length give the text just the right snap and bounce, so fluency supports meaning.
- There is not even ONE point at which the reader says, "This could use some smoothing out."

## CONVENTIONS

**6**

*Only the pickiest of all editors will find errors in this text. It may not be flawless, but it could pass for flawless under the scrutiny of most eyes.*

- The text is essentially correct in all ways.
- In addition, the text shows complexity: dialogue, length, complex/compound sentences, wide variety in use of punctuation, and spelling of difficult words. Yet the writer/editor *never* stumbles.
- Conventions are so skillfully handled that they consistently enhance meaning.
- As appropriate, the writer uses special conventions such as dashes, italics, ellipses, quotation marks, colons, etc. to add emphasis or to invite interpretive reading.
- This text is ready to publish.

Criteria extracted from Vicki Spandel's *Creating Writers, 3rd ed.* New York: Addison, Wesley, Longman, 2001. 49-54, 57-59.

# APPENDIX D

# PERSUASIVE RESEARCH ESSAY RUBRIC

**Author:** _____

## IDEAS

The **thesis is clear, concise and active.** The writing contains properly documented, relevant facts & accurate, quality details that enrich the central theme. The **ideas are fresh**, engaging or sophisticated. The author relies on logic and avoids fallacies.

The thesis is present; however, it may be too broad or predictable. Documented support is evident, but details may be too general, obvious, or insufficient. The ideas are trite and may lack strong sense of purpose. Logic is weak & fallacies are present.

The thesis lacks direction/focus or is not evident Support is minimal or nonexistent and/or not properly documented. Details are limited or unclear.       The ideas are trite, & the text may be repetitious, random, or disconnected. Writing lacks logic & contains fallacies.

| 20 | 18 | 16 | 14 | 12 | 10 | 8 | 6 | 4 | 2 |

## ORGANIZATION

Organization enhances & showcases the thesis. The essay contains **an interesting intro & a satisfying conclusion.** The order and structure of information is compelling and moves the reader easily through the text. **Smooth, effective transitions** exist among all elements.

The organization supports the thesis. The - introduction and conclusion are present. The order and structure show some logic but does not readily move the reader through the text. Transitions are commonplace, inappropriate, or excessive. Organization is too predictable.

The organization neither supports nor develops the thesis. No introduction or conclusion exists. Ideas, details, or events seem strung together loosely or at random. Transitions are non-existent.  Lack of order & structure detracts from understanding.

| 20 | 18 | 16 | 14 | 12 | 10 | 8 | 6 | 4 | 2 |

## VOICE

**The writer speaks directly to the reader in a way** that is individual, compelling and engaging. The writer is aware and **respectful of the audience** & the purpose for writing. The writer risks revealing him/herself, and the writing makes readers think about & react to the author's point of view.

**The writer seems sincere but not fully engaged** or involved. The result is pleasant or personable but not compelling. The writer shows little risk of revealing self. The writer is aware of audience but weighs ideas carefully & discards personal insights in favor of safe generalities.

**The writer seems indifferent, uninvolved, or** distracted from the topic and/or the audience. The writer speaks in a kind of monotone that flattens potential highs & lows of the theme. The writing is humdrum & risk-free. The style of writing mismatches intended reader.

| 20 | 18 | 16 | 14 | 12 | 10 | 8 | 6 | 4 | 2 |

## WORD CHOICE

Words convey the intended message in a precise, interesting, and natural way. The words are powerful, engaging and full of energy; they enhance meaning and clarify understanding. Language and phrasing is effective & appropriate.

The language is functional, even if it lacks much energy. Words are generally correct & appropriate but may be ordinary or may reach beyond the audience. Words & phrases rarely capture the imagination. Clichés and redundancy may exist.

The writer demonstrates limited vocabulary or has not searched for words to convey specific meaning. Words are dull & abstract. Misused parts of speech impair understanding. Jargon or clichés and redundancy distract & mislead.

| 20 | 18 | 16 | 14 | 12 | 10 | 8 | 6 | 4 | 2 |

## SENTENCE FLUENCY

The writing has an easy and natural flow, rhythm and cadence. Purposeful sentences are well built, with strong and varied structure that invites expressive oral reading. The writer uses creative and **appropriate connectives** between thoughts.

The text hums along with a steady beat, but tends to be more pleasant or businesslike than musical, more mechanical than fluid. Sentences usually are sound; some variety is attempted. Readers might need to hunt for connecting words & phrases.

The reader struggles quite a bit to give this piece a fair interpretive reading. The writing tends to be choppy, incomplete, or rambling. Sentence rhythm is clumsy with little variety. The writing lacks or misuses connectives.

| 20 | 18 | 16 | 14 | 12 | 10 | 8 | 6 | 4 | 2 |

## CONVENTIONS

The writer demonstrates a good grasp of using a wide range of standard writing conventions (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, usage, paragraphing) which effectively enhance readability. Some minor errors may exist, but they do not detract from the overall quality of the piece. The writer avoids plagiarism through proper in-text citation and works cited page.

The writer shows reasonable control over a limited range of standard writing conventions (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, usage, para-graphing). Conventions are sometimes handled well & enhance readability; at other times, errors are distracting and impair readability.  The writer attempts proper in-text citation and works cited page with a few minor errors.

Errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, usage, and/or paragraphing repeatedly distract the reader and make the text difficult to read.  The reader must read once to decode, then again for meaning. The writer does not use proper in-text citation or works cited page.

| 20 | 18 | 16 | 14 | 12 | 10 | 8 | 6 | 4 | 2 |

## COMMENTS

TOTAL:_____/120

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