

## Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

### ***Why does the trait model scoring guide (rubric) use 5 points and my state assessment uses 4 or 6 points?***

First of all, remember, the tool you are using is for scoring student writing in the classroom. It's an analytic assessment that gives you scores in a number of traits so you can target instruction on what your students need the most help learning while reinforcing the areas where they already show skill. No matter how many times this model is replicated (it's hundreds and hundreds of times) five levels of performance are created: high, middle, low and two areas in between each of those anchor points.

As we've moved to a standards-driven curriculum, it's easy to see why people want to change the number of points on the scale to match what their state is using. However, take a minute to remember that states test students for different purposes. They want to know how large groups of students are doing toward meeting standards. They aren't interested in individual student performance like a teacher is. So, it makes sense states would use a different instrument to measure student writing performance—a four or a 6 point scale that allows for a clear "cut score" that states use to indicate proficiency. Above a certain point you meet or exceed the standards, below that you don't meet the standards.

That kind of information is helpful to determine trends. It isn't useful to us at the classroom level. We need to know what individual students can do in each of the traits and on a scale that accurately represents the performance levels that this model was built upon. Use 5 points at the classroom level, and let your state use whatever point system they like. Chances are they are reporting information out on a holistic rather than analytic scale anyway. Different scales for different assessments. It just makes sense, right?

### ***Where do I begin?***

At the beginning. Taking time to get inside the writing trait model is time well spent. Score lots and lots of papers. Talk to colleagues about your scores; score some more. There is no better way to understand the analytic trait model than by using it over and over as an assessment tool.

The temptation to go right to teaching strategies or lessons is great. Remember, though, the power of this model is having a shared vocabulary and a vision of what "good" looks like. You can't do that with lessons; it only happens when you get deeply inside the assessment side and bring that information to your instructional practice. All the cute little activities and lesson plans in the world don't add up to something without an organizer that

leads kids to better writing. That organizer is the traits. They tell us what makes good writing and how close we are to getting there on our pieces. After we know that, THEN we can logically ask what lessons are needed to improve specific writing skills. But that is after the assessment, not before or in place of.

### ***How do I begin with students?***

You can begin just as is suggested in your training materials, but you may find other methods work as well. Students who have been working with the traits for a year or more may well begin with designing their own posters, creating icons to stand for the traits, practice assessing their own early pieces, creating a trait handbook of their own to use, planning a parent information session on the traits, or teaching younger kids who don't know the traits in mini-lessons they design on their own. As the teacher, it is strongly suggested that you pre-assess your students the first week of school by scoring a writing sample (prompted or not) on all six traits. This will enable you to analyze current writing performance data and create meaningful lessons that will target your students areas of weakness and reinforce areas of strength.

### ***How long should I spend on each trait?***

That depends on what exposure to the traits they have had prior to your class. I believe, ideas and organization should be the major traits of choice. Most state assessments weight these two traits in one way or another. Take the first part of the school year, until the winter holiday break, focusing on the trait of ideas. After the holidays, tackle the trait of organization. Embed the other trait vocabulary while modeling the process of writing as you go, that way, all the traits are there to help you all the time. Never, ever, ever assign traits to a grade level. Remember, you are teaching writing, not just the traits. So, you have to help kids see that different traits will matter more on different forms of writing. They need to have access to all the traits – 24/7. You can, however, focus on a trait for a while and do in-depth teaching on that trait, all the while referring the other traits as it naturally makes sense.

### ***My kids don't like to read.***

Oh yes they do, they just don't know it yet. To be a good writer you have to be a reader. It's where ideas come from, where the sounds of the language get embedded into our minds, and where we find words to write interesting and informative text. So, students may not think they like to read, but if given enough choices, they will find something they love and then you are off. Read aloud to them every single day. Leave a book at a crucial point and hand it to one of your "non readers." I bet he or she will want to read a few pages to find out what happens.

### ***How can I do writing in the content areas?***

This might be the hottest topic in town. As teachers have realized that writing is a powerful means to help students refine and reflect on their thinking and learning, they have looked for ways to include more writing in content areas such as math, science, social studies, and health.

The first step to using the traits in the content areas is to gather work samples from students in different subject areas. Ask a teacher one or two to share high and low examples of writing that is coming out of their classrooms already, and get to work assessing it using the writing traits model. As you assess, discuss any differences in content writing versus writing in the English class. Chances are you will find few big differences. You may, however, find that some traits take on more importance in content writing over others. For example, if you are writing about Westward expansion of the United States, the chronology may be an important organizer that keeps the work on topic. If you are working on a paper that describes how cross-pollination of orchids create new blossoms and new breeds, the details, the specificity of the language may be paramount.

To write you need all of the traits all the time – 24-7. However, as we look at writing in the content areas, it might serve us well to see which traits make the best connections right off the bat. Our content colleagues will see the relevance of the writing traits model if we pay attention to the demands of their content curriculum and how writing helps them to bring this curriculum forward.

The second step is to unify the language we use when we talk about and work with writing. Regardless of the traits that emerge first in content writing, we should use the same terms in every classroom, and across the grades. Students get very confused when we change the name of the game on them. Let's agree to use the trait names in connection to writing from first grade to forever.

And third, reinforce to content teachers that the goal of using writing in their classrooms is not to make them teachers of writing. They should use writing as a learning tool to help students understand the content of their classes at a deeper and more significant level. They aren't "learning to write" in content classes so much as they are "writing to learn." English teachers will still be the primary places where students learn the craft of writing but hopefully they will have many new contexts for applying that knowledge in content areas.

### ***When do we start working with traits?***

The first month or so of school should be more about getting routines set, creating a respectful atmosphere, and reinforcing how important reading and writing are than specifically working with the writing trait model. Take a few weeks to get to know each other, share information about yourselves as learners, and establish protocols that will work for you the entire year. Once that is done, you can begin to work with the model – either to introduce it for the first time, or to review it from the work of teachers in years’ past.

***My kids don’t like to write stories.***

Not all kids do. A well-developed writing program allows students opportunities to work in a variety of genres, however. Stories are just one area. Young writers need to master exposition, description, persuasion, and fiction writing as well. So, if you have students who are not inclined to write stories, give them other writing tasks to build their confidence and then help them learn the story construct over time. It’s hard to write stories – you need characters, plot, setting, a problem and resolution – it’s quite a bit to juggle. Work at it slowly, and from a position of strength. If kids are writing non fiction and expository, then balance your writing curriculum with other forms of writing over time.

***We teach the traits.***

Sure you do – but only as the traits logically align within the writing process. Technically, we teach writing. Or, if you back up a step, you teach children to write. We teach the traits as smaller subsets of the bigger revision and editing processes. It’s important to break it down for kids so they find writing successful, manageable, and productive. Instead of asking them to revise for Organization, we learn to ask them to look at their lead. Another time we look at how the transitions in the piece work. And yet on another visit we check for a conclusion. One small piece of the trait at a time. So yes, we teach the traits, but really, we teach kids how to use traits to break their writing down into small enough chunks that they really can see what working and what isn’t.

***Are we ready for “Training of Trainers”?***

If you have been to a writing traits company introductory training, and you have implemented the trait model for assessment and instruction in your classroom or school for at least 6 months, then the answer just might be “yes.” Training of trainers or advanced training is designed for individuals who will be working with other staff to introduce the model and sustain its use in local schools and districts. You don’t have to be the world’s leading authority on the traits to attend a training of trainer event, but it is imperative that you’ve worked with the model for some period of time before you take this next step. If you are going to work with other staff, you need your own experiences, your own stories, and your own questions to take this

work to the next level. See our web site: [www.writingtraits.com](http://www.writingtraits.com) for dates and locations of training of trainer events.

*When do we use the beginning writer's continuum and when do we use the regular scoring guide? (From 6+1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide)*  
***Why aren't the rubrics (except for Conventions) broken down by grade level?***

Writing is developmental. Because we have students at many different grade levels in our classrooms, breaking the rubrics down by grade level isn't necessary with the exception of conventions. The reason conventions are broken down by grade level is that we are teaching very specific conventions at each grade level. The elements of good writing are the same no matter the grade level. Obviously, as our students mature as writers, we expect them to use higher level thinking skills in their writing. We expect a more sophisticated use of all the traits.

***Do I have to score every trait on every paper?***

Here's the beauty of this model. The answer is, "NO!" See, our goal here is not to finish every piece of writing. Our goal is to let the kids practice specific writing skills with one or more traits so they become better writers. So, you can teach a focus lesson, have the students practice that specific skill on their own piece of writing, collect that writing, and only assess for that one trait you were working on. The number of traits you score is entirely up to you and what you want students to show they have learned how to do.

***Do I have to use the traits in any particular order?***

The wonderful thing about this model is its flexibility. You can teach writing with any of the traits in any order you choose. Think about the type of writing you're asking your students to do. What trait would logically be the strongest for that type of writing? For example, it makes sense to talk about organization right off the bat with a narrative piece since it most likely will be organized by chronological order. If you are working on a piece of exposition, the idea is really key. The main point you are trying to make with the writing is an excellent starting place. Begin with one trait, and then move on to other traits with other pieces of writing. Remember though, that it is important for your students to see the big picture. You need to show them a strong piece of writing and point out the strengths of each trait.

***What About Primary Writers?***

Beginning writers are well-suited to the traits. They can build a solid foundation for their work as young authors by learning the traits well as they learn to write. If our youngest, most inexperienced writers learn to think, speak, and act like writers, they will become writers. It's very empowering. Consider using the traits all the time in the primary classroom. Tell the

students what they are doing, how it connects to a trait, and reinforce this good start every day. It won't be long before this positive interaction will turn into an in-depth understanding of the traits that they will bring to bear on every writing task in the future.

All writers are beginners at some point and you don't have to be in kindergarten, first or second grade to qualify. Use the idea of a developmentally appropriate scoring guide such as the one we provide at our trainings to assist students as they move from beginning writer (less than a paragraph) to experienced (a fully-developed paragraph or two). And don't listen one word to others out there who tell you primary kids can't handle the traits. They can, they do, and it's quite wonderful to watch them in action.