Teaching Traits Conceptually: Introductory Lessons

3

Teaching masters like Janet Emig, Donald Graves and Jerome Bruner tell us students learn best when they mine their spontaneous knowledge for skills they already use. Simply put, we learn by doing; then we go on to do more through learning.

—Barry Lane and Gretchen Bernabei

Why We Must Run with Scissors (2001, p. 1)

Writing allows us to hold our life in our hands and make something of it.

—Lucy McCormick Calkins

The Art of Teaching Writing (1994, p. 4)

Poor horsemanship consists in suggesting that man and horse are separate. A horseman afoot is a wingless, broken thing, tyrannized by gravity . . . for that burst of poetry, horse and rider have one another to thank.

—Thomas McGuane

Some Horses (2000, pp. 18–19)

"NOTHING TO DO WITH MY CURRICULUM"

A primary teacher intrigued me one day when she said, "I can't work with these traits—they have nothing to do with my curriculum." When I asked her to describe her curriculum, she said, "Well, we talk about fun things we could write about. We make lists. Then we have time for writing, and sometimes I help my kids get started. Later, we share what we have written. Sometimes, we make displays." Fun things to write about? Those are ideas. Making lists? A way of capturing ideas on paper. Getting started? Organization. Sharing? Voice—and words, too, of course. Displays? Often, some

attention to detail there that might connect to revising ideas or thinking about conventions. In other words, the six traits were embedded in everything this teacher was doing. She was seeing the traits as something separate, a new layer of instruction, an extra "workbook."

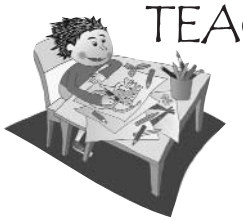
It is not like that at all. What the traits do, really, is get us organized. My mentor teacher, Ronda, turned the light on for me when I saw her sprawled in the middle of her classroom one August afternoon, her files in apparent disarray around her. When I asked what she was doing, she replied, "It's simple. I already teach all this stuff [the traits]. I'm just reorganizing my lessons so that when I want something on organization or voice or fluency, I can find it. See?" I did see. Ronda also inspired me to color code my files: red for ideas, green for organization, and so on. This is such a simple idea, but it is so helpful. Not new so much, you see, as *restructured.* Many of the best books on writing give us a thousand good ideas but never answer the one question we're burning to know: How do I get started? The traits make it simple. Start with ideas—a message, a topic, something you love to write about. Model it, read books that show how skillful authors express main ideas and details, and then add another trait (*writing*, of course, all the while).

Emphasize what students need. As Ronda told me, "Every class is different. Some are strong in conventions—some have wonderful voice or details. It's when I look at their writing that I know where to spend my teaching time." You'll know, too.

Two things are critical at the primary level:

1. Writing, reading, and just plain loving it.
2. Using writers' vocabulary so that such terms as *voice* or *fluency* are at least familiar—even if they are not integral parts of a child's own writing.

You can teach the first by being an enthusiastic writer/reader yourself, by providing time and a classroom environment in which students are immersed in wonderful literature and feel comfortable as writers. Teach writers' vocabulary by using the language yourself at every opportunity. And remember, if it is difficult for some students to grasp the notion of, say, fluency in the context of writing, you could start with the larger notion of fluency. What is it, really? This chapter is meant to give you an inside look at the *concept underlying each trait* as a way of making definitions clearer to young minds.



TEACHING THE CONCEPT OF IDEAS

Ideas can be taught conceptually in many ways, because they are many things. They are everything we think or imagine or picture in our heads. Ideas can begin with something huge: *Things that grow.* Then, by fine-tuning our mental binoculars, we focus in on our idea and bring it down to manageable proportions: *Plants . . . houseplants . . . my philodendron . . . the philodendron that is overtaking my file cabinet, keeping me out with its leafy arms.*

Let me suggest three key approaches, each of which can be taught separately—even to students who are not yet creating much (if any) text. They are

1. Ideas as *imagination* and *observation*
2. Ideas as *pictures in the mind*
3. Ideas as *messages*

Ideas as Imagination and Observation

Give students something interesting to observe—a rock, say, or a seashell or an orange peel. Ask them to look, sniff, touch, tap, and turn it around to see it from different sides. As they do so, they should ask themselves the questions "What do I notice?" and "What does it remind me of?" A simple object such as a rock may suggest to the imagination a mountain looming in the distance or the shape of an animal. It may take the observer, in his or her imagination, to a wooded glen or the flatlands of a desert. It may remind one writer of her aquarium and another of his grandmother's rock garden. The smell of an orange may take a writer to a kitchen, a picnic, or a grove in Florida.

Observations and associations, especially when recorded, teach children to be keen observers of the world—and mental recorders as well. A writer can have no greater gift. As writer James Dickey (in Calkins, 1994, p. 3) has observed, "A writer is someone who is enormously taken by things anyone else would walk by."

You can enhance this experience by recording your students' observations and rewarding them by appreciating the small details they notice—especially if you did not notice them yourself. Have you ever looked, *really* looked, at people's hands, for example? The shape, the look of the nails, and the lines and creases all tell us who the person is, even if we have no other details on which to rely. Author Rick Bragg wrote of his grandfather's hands, "They hung at the ends of his skinny arms like baseball mitts, so big that a normal man's hand disappeared in them. The calluses made an unbroken ridge across his palm, and they were rough, rough all over as shark's skin. The grease and dirt, permanent as tattoos, inked his skin, and the tar and dirt colored the quick under his fingernails, then and forever. He could have burned his overalls, changed his name and bought himself a suit and tie, but those hands would have told on him" (2001, p. 52). This is observational genius—coupled with supreme inferential skill. And it starts right in your classroom, looking at a simple object as you jot down what your children see and celebrating their skill in seeing.

Ideas as Pictures in the Mind

We see with our eyes, but we see within our minds as well. Ideas grow out of what students hear and what they visualize from what they hear. In *Twilight Comes Twice*, Ralph Fletcher (1997) creates image upon image, a mental collage that defines dawn and dusk in myriad ways. In what remains my favorite passage from the book, Fletcher tells us, "Slowly dusk pours the syrup of darkness into the forest. Crows gather in the trees for last-minute gossip before nightfall." Close your eyes and you can see the syrupy darkness falling slow and thick across the trees, covering them and blurring the shapes. You can see and hear the crows gathered on the branches, chatting with each other.

Now imagine your students creating pictures from what they see and feel and hear as you share a story, a poem, or a moment of your own experience. Students, who draw freely—without fear of "getting it wrong"—create as much meaning with pictures as with text. They incorporate details, and they let us know what meaning a passage has had for them. They may expand meaning, too. Part of Fletcher's art is that he never tells too much. So often our teacher comments include the suggestion, "Tell me more." What we really mean sometimes is, "Tell

me the *right* thing—the *just right* thing." Encourage your students to speak through art. Sketching and painting are ways of discovering what that "just right" detail might be.

It is easy to sketch what Ralph Fletcher describes. His images seem to float right off the page and into our hearts and minds as if he were touching a spot within our brains that could take us to a time and place where we had once been ourselves. If a writer labors with every word, the mental pictures come less easily. Suppose that Ralph had written, "Everything got darker. Then some birds came." This would be tougher to sketch, don't you think? Just as writers can tell too much, they can also tell too little. Therefore, ask your students as they draw what they picture: "What do you see? Is it easy to draw? Do you see enough? You *do?* The little parts of what you see are detail." They hear, they see in their minds, they draw—and often, they expand. Expect their pictures to encompass more than Fletcher—or any author—provides a blueprint for. Their mental pictures will stretch and grow—as long as you let them form on their own and do not too quickly share the pictures from the books (however wonderful!). Oh, it's tempting. After all, we buy picture books partly (sometimes *mostly*) for the pictures. Now and then, however, it is refreshing for the mind to make its own movies.

Ideas as Messages

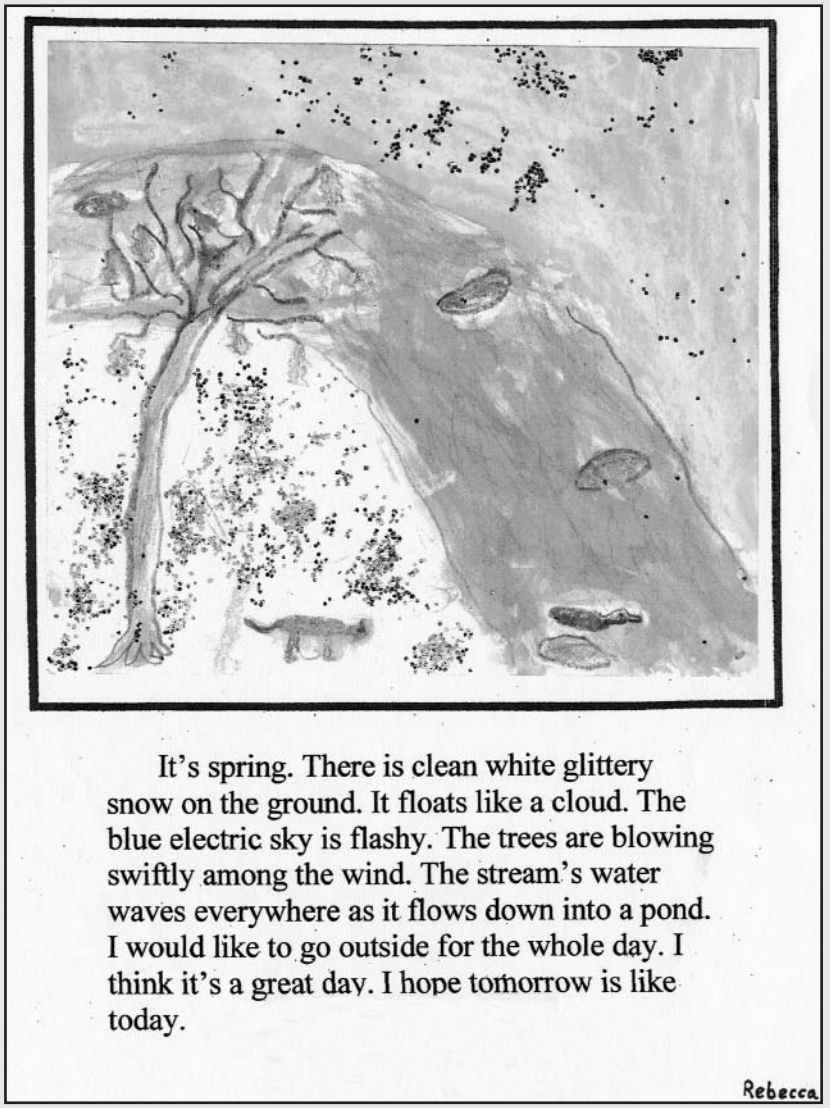
In the introduction to his wonderful book, *More than Stories*, teacher and author Thomas Newkirk (1989, p. 1) tells the delightful tale of his five-year-old daughter reading the long list of rules posted at the city's swimming pool. Why, Newkirk wondered, would this young child take such a long time in the cold winter air to study rules that she could only begin to read? The answer was that she wanted to go into the sauna—and could not. It was this print, these rules, that kept her out: "Here we were, about fifty swimmers in all, seemingly controlled by the words written on this poster, words that would, among other things, keep her out of the sauna bath until near the twenty-first century" (1989, p. 1).

The rules carried a message, and that message was, in essence, "You cannot do what you want because you're too young." Often, this is precisely what we mean by ideas—a message.

See how many ways your students can think of that we give messages to each other in our society. Here are a few (they will think of more):

- ✔ Conversation
- ✔ Television
- ✔ Radio
- ✔ E-mail
- ✔ Post-It notes
- ✔ Signs
- ✔ Letters
- ✔ Advertisements
- ✔ Newspapers
- ✔ Greeting cards
- ✔ Bumper stickers
- ✔ Labels
- ✔ Directions
- ✔ Product packaging

Figure 3.1 Imagination and clarity. Rebecca (2)



What separates a good message from a poor one? Simple. You can understand it. It makes sense. This is just a simple way of saying that it has *clarity*. When you ask your students to line up, take out paper, give you their attention, prepare to go home for the day, remember something to bring for tomorrow, or take a notice to parents, you are giving a message. And when you ask, "Does everyone understand? Do you have questions?" you are checking for clarity.

Messages can be very simple, like "Stop!" Or they can be as complex as the Internal Revenue Service tax code. The greater the complexity, of course, the harder it is to maintain clarity. That's the test of a good informational writer, really; a truly gifted informational writer can make tax codes as understandable as traffic signs.

You might teach this message concept by having students write notes home—through pictures or print—about *one* significant thing that happened during the day. Ask them to write Post-It note reminders to each other; again using pictures, print, or a combination. Ask students to create posters for classroom rules, such as behaving courteously. Again, pictures or print—it does not matter. What matters is that the message goes from writer to reader in any way that makes sense. Clarity is the name of the game.

Ideas as "Something to Write About"

When students hear the word *ideas*, they often think of the age-old question, "What shall I write about?" Write what you know, we tell them, or write what interests you. What *is* that anyway? We ask these questions of our students, but the truth is, often we cannot answer them ourselves. Ever notice how a million things interest you until someone sticks an eight and a half by eleven inch sheet of paper in front of you? Then, amazingly, you cannot think of one interesting thing. So what do you do? As Anne Lamott tells us, there is no "magic formula my father passed on to me in a whisper just before he died." You just sit down and do it. "You begin to string words together like beads to tell a story" (1995, p. 7).

USING LISTS

We all have stories in our lives, things we notice, things that interest us, and opinions about this or that. Everyday events become the stuff of narrative, descriptive, expository, and persuasive writing—the basis for notes and letters, how-to pieces, essays, and stories. For example, ground squirrels routinely devour our flowers and plantings (right down to the root—and sometimes the roots, too). We are reluctant to kill them, however pesky though they may be, so we have engaged in a relocation plan, trapping them in a humane manner, and then taking them to a greener area rich with all manner of flora, near a river. It's a lot of work. We have to bait the traps, watch them carefully so the squirrels are not left without food or water for too long, and then drive a half hour each way to reach the river. Our neighbors think we are insane. They tell us we should drown the squirrels—or perhaps shoot them. Frankly, I would not have missed the experience of transporting them to new homes. I have learned to trap them successfully, to keep them calm during transportation, and to release them in places where they are most likely to survive and flourish. I've even learned to enjoy their antics, knowing I can successfully banish them from my flower beds. Best of all, I have wonderful fodder for writing. I could write a description of a ground squirrel's tunneling network, or a persuasive essay on the advantages of relocation. I could even write a story about the time my neighbor was bitten by an aggressive ground squirrel he tried to drown (OK, I made that one up, but I *could* write it). We need to model how everyday happenings become writing topics so our students see that writing ideas are all around us, all the time.

When we give the topic to our students, we assume a common experience that does not exist.

—Donald Murray

A Writer Teaches Writing (2004, p. 96)

Every book, film, conversation, ride on the bus, glance out the window sparks a hundred possibilities for writing—if you have learned to think like a writer. If not, the whole world looks like a blank page.

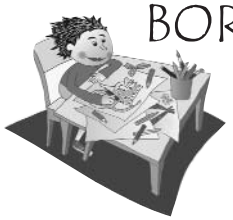
—Vicki Spandel

The 9 Rights of Every Writer (2005, p. 21)

What are three things you are thinking of writing about *right now?* Write them down. This is the beginning of a list you can share with your students. You can't share it just once, of course. You need to share your list frequently because it will change all the time. Here is my current list of things to write about (I am not going to write about all of these, you understand—or maybe any of them—it's just an idea list):

- ✔ How to entertain yourself when you miss a flight
- ✔ How to deer proof your yard
- ✔ What to do when a truly angry dog comes after you—and you are alone
- ✔ How to get up when you are cross-country skiing and fall into a deep snow bank
- ✔ The story of Jack (my grandson) and how toddlers and adults define the concept of "toy" differently
- ✔ The sheer joy of watching sea turtles at play—from underwater

This is my list. I would not assign *any* of these topics to my students because their experiences are different. The only person I can effectively choose topics for is myself—and that is how I want students to feel, too.

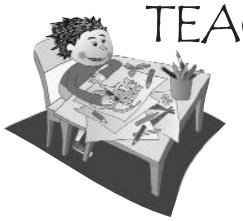


BORROWING

One good place to go for writing ideas is a writing group—or simply a friend who writes. Just as the fish are always better on the other side of the lake, so the other writer is always coming up with a better idea. Barry Lane (2002) is writing a series of stories based on fables, his first being *The Tortoise and the Hare Continued. . . .* I like this idea very much—the notion that stories aren't

really over when they're over—there is always another episode. This is a good one to borrow. Author Anne Lamott advises her students, "Write down all the stuff you swore you'd never tell another soul. What can you recall about your birthday parties—the disasters, the days of grace, your relatives' faces lit up by birthday candles? Scratch around for details: what people ate, listened to, wore—those terrible petaled swim caps, the men's awful trunks, the cocktail dress your voluptuous aunt wore that was so slinky she practically needed the Jaws of Life to get out of it" (1995, p. 5). I love this advice because basically she is telling us, each of us, "Your life is fascinating, and because only *you* have lived it, only *you* know what to write."

Our students need to talk to one another *before* they write—and to help one another discover ideas for writing. In *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, Donald Graves suggests that we should know our students and their interests in order to help them find topics. Rather than assigning topics, he says, know the child well enough to explore his or her world. He even suggests making a chart (and if you have never tried this, it may surprise you to discover how hard it is) listing each student's name and special interests (1983, pp. 22–28). That way, the first conference can focus on topics—not topics we assign but questions that lead children to topics of their own: What is the most interesting thing that ever happened to you? What is your first really vivid memory? Do you have any pets? Do you have hobbies? What do you find fascinating? Annoying? As Graves tells us, "Writers who learn to choose topics well make the most significant growth in both information and skills. . . . with [the] best topic the child exercises strongest control, establishes ownership, and with ownership, pride in the piece" (1983, p. 21). Ownership and pride—that's a recipe for voice. Voice begins with having something to say. "Writers who do not learn to choose topics wisely lose out on the strong link between voice and subject" (Graves, 1983, p. 21).



TEACHING ORGANIZATION CONCEPTUALLY

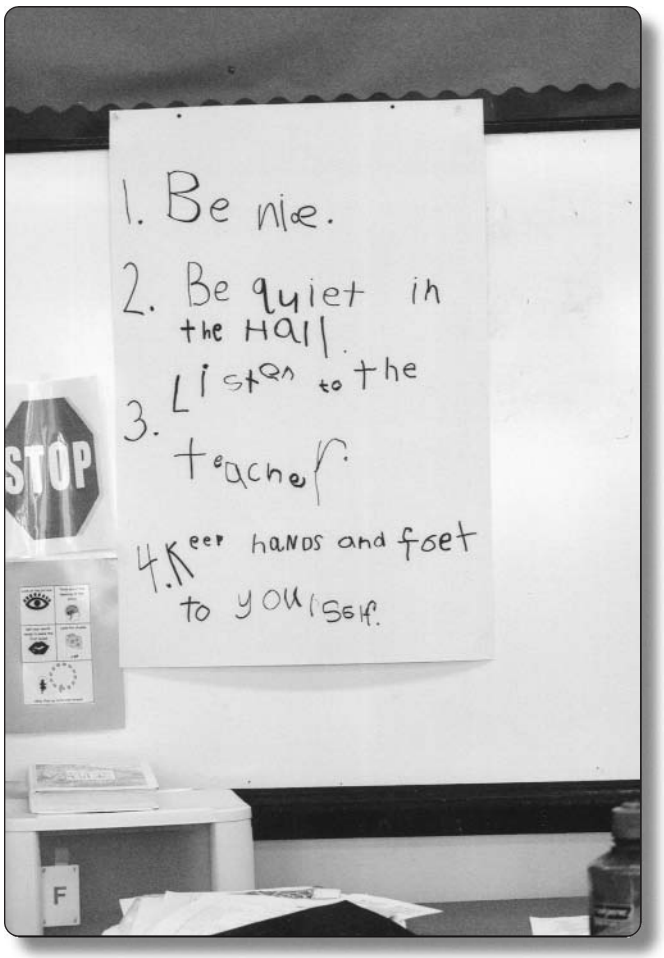
When we connect organization to writing, we think immediately of leads, transitions, conclusions, orderly paragraphing, patterning, and so on. However, the concept of organization is much larger than writing. It can be taught in several ways.

- ✔ Organization as *patterning*
- ✔ Organization as *grouping*
- ✔ Organization as *making a plan*

Organization as Patterning

Many things in life are organized—and you might brainstorm a list with your students. The following is a list of things students have mentioned at various times—and no doubt your students will think of more:

- ✔ Grocery stores (and other stores, of course)
- ✔ Closets (not mine, but some)
- ✔ An ant colony
- ✔ Traffic



- ✔ City streets
- ✔ A buffet in a restaurant
- ✔ A hotel
- ✔ A sports team
- ✔ Colors in a crayon box
- ✔ Living room furniture
- ✔ Newspapers
- ✔ Telephone books
- ✔ Rows of crops
- ✔ The alphabet
- ✔ Dishes in a cupboard
- ✔ A calendar
- ✔ A blueprint for a house
- ✔ An eight-course dinner

Good. Think about how each thing is organized—what sort of pattern does it follow? Alphabetical? Geographic (like a map)? Little to big? Salad to dessert? And so on. Now, what about the things in the world that are disorganized (or random)? Here are some things students have mentioned:

- ✔ *Some* closets
- ✔ *Some* desks
- ✔ Clouds in the sky
- ✔ Weeds
- ✔ People running from a fire or accident
- ✔ A fight
- ✔ My hair in the morning
- ✔ Wrinkly clothes packed in a hurry
- ✔ My notebook!

- ✔ The laundry when it first comes out of the dryer
- ✔ My dad's calendar
- ✔ Our kitchen
- ✔ Our car

In one group, we see patterns; in the other, not. This is one underlying concept of organization: things in patterns. You can reinforce this basic idea throughout the day or the week by asking students to identify moments or events during which things or people fall into patterns—or not: People line up for the bus (that's organized); leaves blow off the tree in the wind (that's not). Soon your students will be seeing organizational patterns everywhere—and you can reinforce this with art. Ask them to draw a picture of something organized and a picture of something random. This reinforces their thinking about the basic notion of organization. Now it is time to extend it, if you wish.

Sometimes patterning is vital; at other times it really does not matter. For example, no one cares whether leaves fall from a tree in a precise pattern. We rather like the randomness. However, take one of the student examples—the grocery store. There, order matters a lot. Why, though? Ask your students this: What if you went to the grocery store and things were totally jumbled: paper towels mixed with oranges, soup mixed with toothbrushes. Would that work? Why? Suppose that you opened your calendar and the dates were out of order. Would a calendar like that be usable? How come? The question here is: How does organization make life easier? Your students will have creative answers, and their answers will provide the foundation for what you want to teach later—that organization in writing makes some writing easier to interpret and to follow. (A poem may be more random than, say, a how-to chapter on fixing your lawnmower.)

Don't Forget Puzzles

Jigsaw puzzles make patterns—patterns that are not always immediately obvious. In many ways, assembling a puzzle is a way of solving an organizational challenge: What is the picture or pattern I am supposed to be seeing? Many people (young and older) solve puzzles by beginning with the outside framework. This is rather like coming up with a main idea that frames what follows. Puzzle pieces are linked together with colors or shapes; words, phrases, and sentences are linked together by common ideas.

Pictures in a Series

Give your students three pictures, related or not, and ask them to put the pictures in order and tell a story based on the arrangement (There does not need to be any right answer to this—it's an exercise in imagination). The pattern they choose determines the story. When they have finished, see if they can shift the order to come up with a different story.

Organization as Grouping

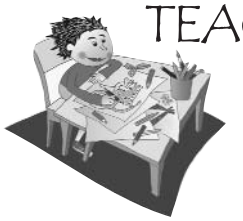
Grouping is easy to teach. It is simply putting things together that go together. You can teach grouping with items of similar size, color, shape, texture, or any other common trait. This practice provides a foundation for creating

paragraphs or chapters—for "chunking" information. You can do an interesting grouping activity with something like rocks or coins, where there are numerous possibilities for grouping. Coins, for example, can be grouped by color, size, value, or date—or in a number of other ways your students will surprise you by thinking of. The same is true for rocks and numerous other objects. Grouping can be done in teams, and when you are finished, ask students to share the various methods of grouping their teams have thought of.

Organization as Making a Plan

When you have an event coming up—a conference night, a school gathering, a field trip, or whatever—make a "plan" with students. You may decide to prepare invitations or posters, to celebrate, to write about the event, to take a class picture, or any number of things. Planning is an important component of organizing because it requires anticipation and prediction. When you plan as a group, you ask students to envision what will happen in the future.

This is the idea, really, behind prewriting: making a plan for writing (so what you are teaching is a precursor to the prewriting phase of writing process). Of course, in our lives, when the wedding plans do not work out, we amend them—or abandon them. Somehow, we forgot to give ourselves such freedom with writing, in which outlines can become tyrannical. Where we often go awry with prewriting is in forcing student writers to stick relentlessly to whatever plan they come up with (never mind if it's working!). This defeats the whole point. The planning sets thinking in motion; drafting continues the development of that thinking. An idea evolves throughout the prewriting, drafting, and revising stages—and must be given freedom to do so. Force students to adhere to a prewriting plan (whether a list, a web, or whatever), and you shut down their thinking. Lucy Calkins says, "I've come to think that it's very important that writing is not only a process of recording, it's also a process of developing a story or idea" (1994, p. 8).



TEACHING VOICE CONCEPTUALLY

Of all the traits, I love voice the most because voice is the person speaking to us from the page. Voice is the essence of the writing, the reason for the writing, and the reason for reading. Voice is the place where many students, regardless of technical skill in other areas of writing, are likely to shine.

Let me suggest several different ways of teaching this elusive but vital concept:

- ✔ Voice as a *metaphor*
- ✔ Voice as *individuality*
- ✔ Voice as *mood*

Voice as Metaphor

This first way to teaching voice is the simplest—and it is a good place to begin. One day, when I visited my friend Arlene Moore's K-1 classroom, she said, quite out of the blue, "Jennifer, that dress has so much voice!" Indeed

it did. It was a bright rosy pink with yellow loose-petal flowers hand-stitched onto the front.

"I love bright colors," Arlene went on. "It makes me feel good just looking at them." She went on to ask her students what colors they felt had the most voice—and not surprisingly, the striking colors of purple, orange, yellow, and red were popular responses. We then talked about colors without voice—but this time, there was not so much agreement. Some children saw tan as voice-free, but one young writer said that tan was the color of beach sand, which he loved—so for him, tan did have voice. Many students felt that gray lacked voice, until one writer ran to the window and pointed out the number of different grays in the sky; a storm was brewing. "Gray can be a storm color, and storms have voice," he reminded us. Voice is personal.

Arlene likes to connect voice to favorite and least favorite foods, too—"strong voice" foods typically include the perennial favorite, pizza, as well as ice cream, chocolate, hamburgers, fruit, cotton candy, and so on. For students, "low voice" foods include tapioca pudding, leftovers of all kinds, liver, undercooked eggs, watery oatmeal, and "anything my sister makes in the blender."

Use your imagination in making metaphoric connections. Anything that taps into the senses will work, including music, art, dance, films, TV shows—even animals. "Zebras and chimpanzees have a lot of voice, and slugs don't," one first grader told me (or perhaps the "slug" voice is less appealing to us).

Voice as Individuality

Voice is the imprint of ourselves on our writing. It is that part of the self that pushes the writing ahead, the dynamo in the process. Take the voice away and the writing collapses of its own weight. There is no writing, just words following words. Voiceless writing is addressed "to whom it may concern."

—Donald H. Graves
Writing (1983, p. 227)

Here's a question I like to ask students: "When you talk to a friend on the phone, how long does it take you to recognize that person?" Not long. Why? Because every voice is different. Try this. Have your students close their eyes, tap one student on the shoulder, and ask him or her to make a simple statement: "Guess who I am." Everyone will guess correctly. That's how individual voices are.

Voice shows itself in other forms, too, such as art. Show your students works by a few well-known artists, for example, Picasso, Charles Schulz, Bev Doolittle, William Steig, Jules Feiffer, and folk artist Charles Wysocki. What are the differences? What kinds of "voices" are these artists showing in their paintings? Don't worry about whether your students recognize the artists; that really makes no difference at all. You are simply looking for their responses to the voice within the art. Who *is* this person? You can also use art from the vibrant world of picture books, of course. Some *particularly* striking examples include

- ✔ Jean-Michel Basquiat [in Maya Angelou's *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* (1993)]
- ✔ Jannell Cannon [in her book *Verdi* (1997)]
- ✔ Lauren Child [in her book *I Am Too Absolutely Small for School* (2003)]
- ✔ Steve Jenkins [in his book *Actual Size* (2005)]
- ✔ Tom Lichtenheld [in his book *Everything I Know About Pirates* (2000)]
- ✔ Jackie Morris [in Carolyn Pitcher's *Lord of the Forest* (2004)]
- ✔ Margie Palatini [in her book *Bedhead* (2000)]
- ✔ Giselle Potter [in Toni Morrison's *The Big Box* (1999)]

- ✔ Lynn Rowe Reed [in Robin Pulver's *Punctuation Takes a Vacation* (2003)]
- ✔ Chris Raschka [in Norton Juster's *The Hello, Goodbye Window* (2005)]
- ✔ David Shannon [in his book *Alice the Fairy* (2004)]
- ✔ Lane Smith [in Jon Scieszka's *Math Curse* (1995)]
- ✔ William Steig [in *any* of his books, including but not limited to *Amos and Boris*, 1971; *The Toy Brother*, 1996; *Dr. De Soto*, 1999; *Solomon the Rusty Nail*, 1987; *The Amazing Bone*, 1993; *Brave Irene*, 1988; *Shrek*, 1993]
- ✔ Lauren Stringer [in Cynthia Rylant's *Scarecrow* (1998)]
- ✔ Stefano Vitale [in Alice Walker's *There Is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me* (2006)]
- ✔ Mo Willems [in his book *Knuffle Bunny* (2004)]

Pictures, like text, have mood and tone. Talk about this with your students. Ruth Wright Paulsen, for example, creates a hauntingly beautiful snowscape for Gary Paulsen's *Dogteam* that fits the adventurous, mysterious mood of the book perfectly. David Shannon's illustrations are playful, and sometimes outrageous. Giselle Potter creates unique details with eyes, mouth, and hair. She can sketch a character to make you laugh out loud or break your heart. Mo Willems combines photographs and cartoon-like characters for an artsy, modern look, while Stefano Vitale's work creates symbolic, almost surreal effects. Chris Raschka's childlike paintings of Nanna's kitchen window touch the heart, Lauren Stringer's paintings give a nostalgic sweetness to Cynthia Rylant's classic *Scarecrow*, while Jackie Morris's bold and dramatic tigers give breathtaking power to *Lord of the Forest.* Jannell Cannon is stylish, but leans toward a mix of reality and fantasy. Cannon relies heavily on texture and color to create the "voice" imprint of her work. In *all* his books, William Steig is humorous and unpredictable. Steig's artistic voice relies on facial expression and the interaction between characters, whose motives and intentions are immediately readable on their faces. Artistic voice is an important tool; it can lure us into the content. Lynn Rowe Reed's whimsical style makes punctuation seem an appealing, lighthearted topic. Tom Lichtenheld's jaunty, defiant pirates make us want to climb aboard for adventure. Steve Jenkins' stunningly colorful collage art bridges the gap between imagination and science, beautifully blending two interpretations of the world. The point is, voice can be as strong in art as it is in text, and no two artistic voices are alike. Once students begin to see voice in the artwork around them, they become more conscious of their own artistic voices—the individuality that makes their work unique. But you must *say* it, you must emphasize and applaud that individuality, or your students will not automatically value it. Help them notice and appreciate the differences among artists so that they will value those same differences among themselves.

Voice as Mood

Music offers an immediate way of helping students tune into mood. Think of a film you have seen recently—or at any time. How often did the music let you know what was about to happen? You know when the hero is in trouble, don't you? Or when something sad—such as the old, faithful dog dying—is about to happen? Think of the music *you* play when you are in a celebrational mood, at a

party or wedding, versus what you might play as background music when you are reading or working. What do you play to cheer yourself up? To mellow out? What pieces of music speak to you?

Right now, while you are thinking of it, jot down three memorable pieces of music. (They do not have to be your three all-time favorites—just three that pop into your head.) Are they instrumental or vocal? Lively? Wistful? How do they make you feel?

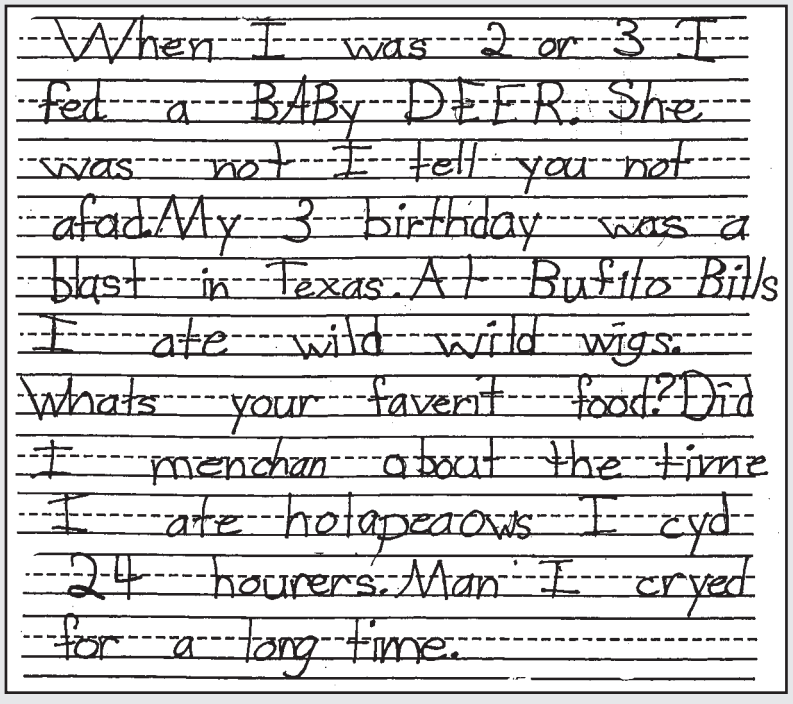
With your students, explore the moods of music by playing a variety for them, marches, symphonies, folk music, Celtic music. Compare Willie Nelson; Bob Dylan; Rod Stewart; Sinatra; Peter, Paul, and Mary; Beethoven; Mozart; The Chieftains; Raffi; Greg and Steve; and Norah Jones. Compare Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's light, upbeat version of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" (*In IZ World*, 1992) to Judy Garland's more heart-wrenching rendition (*Judy at Carnegie Hall*, 1967). Ask students to tell you how each piece of music makes them *feel*. Voice is ultimately about reader response—which begins with listener response. Music is vivid and embracing, but the response your students have to music as it engulfs them teaches them how to respond emotionally to poetry or to prose.

Different Voices, Different Times

Most of us have a wide range of voices: one for pleading with a parent or child to please do *whatever*, another for cheering on the team on the football field, for conspiring with a close friend, for arguing with a petulant sibling, for greeting a stranger on the phone, or talking to an infant or a puppy. You may wish to actually have your students try this out. Set up a situation. Let's say that you want the door closed. First, have a student ask a parent to do this. Notice the words and the tone of voice. Then ask another student to imagine that his or her very annoying younger brother has left the door open for the "bazillionth" time—what do you say, and *how do you say it?* Then have a third student teach a toddler how to close the door—what do you say, and *how do you say it?*

If you tell first graders that mystery stories, business letters, and personal essays all have slightly different voices, you cannot really expect them to understand what you mean—yet. However, when you tell them that we all have many voices within us and that we use different voices at different times, they do understand. You are only planting a seed.

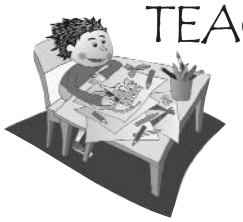
Figure 3.2 "Good Memories" is an expressive piece of personal writing by Skye (2).


When I was 2 or 3 I
fed a BABy DEER. She
was not I tell you not
afad. My 3 birthday was a
blast in Texas. At Bufilo Bills
I ate wild wild wigs.
Whats your favert food? Did
I menchan about the time
I ate holapeaows I cyd
24 hourers. Man I cryed
for a long time.

Wearing Many Hats

Clothing gives us clues about mood, tone, and purpose. I do not wear my jeans to a wedding or chiffon to the rodeo. If you're a hat collector, you can use a variety of hats to indicate various kinds of voice. A cowboy hat might suggest one thing, a gardener's hat another, and a wide fedora with a peacock feather something else. You can bet your students will recognize colorful versus drab, formal versus informal, playful versus serious. This same visual effect works for word choice, too—and later, for fluency. Sentences, like voices and word patterns, can come to the party dressed to the teeth or lounging in comfy clothes. Play "dress-up for voice" with your students. Ask each person to come to class with a hat of some kind, and talk about the kind of voice each one suggests.

TEACHING WORD CHOICE CONCEPTUALLY



Choice is the operative word here. You might begin with menus. Ask your students to view them and to make choices as if they were ordering food right now. Write their choices down, and explain that writers choose words much the way hungry diners choose foods from a menu or shoppers choose groceries or other things to purchase. We have hundreds of thousands of words in English; yet, for a particular moment, to create a particular picture in the reader's mind or a particular response, only the "just right" word will do—the way sometimes you *only* want hot fudge or a burger. Writers are picky or, we could say, *discriminating*, *selective*, *choosy*, *fussy*, *particular*, *demanding*, or *persnickety*. Some simple ways to teach word choice conceptually include these:

- ✔ Word choice as *weight*
- ✔ Word choice as *the target*

Word Choice as Weight

Some words carry a lot of weight. This is another way of saying that they have substance, meaning, impact. Vague words—*nice*, *big*, *happy*, *sad*, *great*, *fun*—are pebbles. They do not tip the scale because they do not tell us anything. You can illustrate this with a scale and a collection of rocks and pebbles. As your students encounter a new word, ask them, "Rock or pebble? What do you think?" Glue or tape the rock or pebble to a card with the word printed on it, and place it right on the scale. Be sure, though, to let your students make the choice.

To kick off this game, you need some examples. Start simply, with a word your students use often—such as *big*. We all use it, but it's a "pebble" word, really. It does not say much. What are some weightier alternatives? How about *enormous*, *vast*, *bulky*, *burly*, *robust*, or *weighty*? Of course, these words are not completely interchangeable. This is the tricky part, isn't it? We can say, "The *vast* landscape stretched before us," but "The *bulky* landscape stretched before us" doesn't work. So, you will need to provide sample sentences for clarification. By the way, lots of letters do not add up to more "weight"—it is more a question of how specific a word is. I am *glad* when a favorite movie is on television; I am *jubilant* when my daughter phones to say that she is coming for the weekend with my grandson Jack.

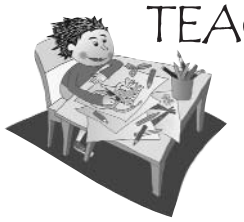
One of the best ways to show off heavy language is through literature. In *Verdi* (1997), Jannell Cannon writes about a young python being sent into the jungle to grow up "big and green" as all pythons must. Cannon could have written, "Verdi was a *nice* python. He wasn't *too big*. He was *slow*. He was *happy*. He had *neat* stripes *going down* his back." Instead, she used some heavy language: "Verdi dawdled. He was proudly eyeing his bright yellow skin. He especially liked the bold stripes that zigzagged down his back." We never hear a teacher say, "I'm just so tired of *zigzagged* and *dawdled*. There *must* be another way to say it!" We all like fresh language; we cannot get enough.

Word Choice as The Target

Precision is an important component of word choice. When one of your students uses a particularly precise word, you can paste that word right onto a "Word Choice Target"—right at the bull's-eye. In *Smoky Night* (1994), Eve Bunting describes a street riot. Following the turmoil, a street sign "lies crumpled in the gutter." Not bent. Not broken. *Crumpled*. Does that word hit the bull's-eye? You only have to ask your students, "What do you picture when you hear it? Does *crumpled* tell you more than *bent*?"

In *The Toy Brother* (1996), William Steig tells the tale of Yorick, a mischievous young sprout who hopes to become an alchemist, like his father—and who finds his brother Charles a real "pain in the pants." Charles cannot "fathom" why Yorick doesn't like him more and hopes they will someday become "palsy-walsy." When Yorick accidentally shrinks himself, Charles (who is on a ladybug hunt at the time) finds Yorick "thrashing" through the weeds: "It was indeed Yorick, down to the minuscule wart on his knuckle!" *Pain in the pants*, *fathom*, *palsy-walsy*, *thrashing*, *minuscule*—those are right-on-target words, bull's-eyes. Contrast this version: "Yorick wasn't much *fun*. He wasn't *nice*. Charles did not *get why*." We are on the outer rim of the target here.

What I like about the target is that it helps students to see that you can get the basic meaning across with vague words—like *nice*. Taking extra care to aim for the center, however, is worth it; bull's-eye words wake readers up.



TEACHING FLUENCY CONCEPTUALLY

Fluency is wonderfully rewarding to teach conceptually. It is all about rhythm, grace, and motion. Think for a moment how very many things this applies to in real life—everything from an Olympic ski jumper to your own way of climbing or descending stairs. It could be the ripple of waves or the flutter of a butterfly. Wind in the treetops or a dust devil darting across the fallow fields of the North Dakota farmlands. To teach this, start with your own graceful movement—again relying on music. This time, though, you are going for movement, not emotional response. Choose something lively, with a strong beat. Ask students to move to the music. They can march, twirl, wave arms, clap hands, snap fingers, stomp feet, sway—whatever has rhythm. You need to move with them. They need to feel the beat. You can teach . . .

- ✔ Fluency as *personal imagery*
- ✔ Fluency as *"come alive" poetry* (you can perform)

Fluency as Personal Imagery

Brainstorm. Ask students to brainstorm what in the whole wide world around you moves with rhythm. They will surprise you with their answers. As they speak, write what they say on an overhead transparency, creating a poem of possibles. Here is one third-grade version:

Fluency Is . . .

Geese in a giant V
Wild horses running
Whales sounding
Bats darting after insects
Clouds shifting, meandering
A rodeo clown
Dancers in a line
A parade
Wheat in the fields
Grasses bent by the wind
Trees swaying in the storm
Lightning flashing
A chef flipping burgers
Gravy dripping over mashed potatoes
Skaters gliding
Skiers flying
Water flowing down a mountain
Waves pounding on the shore
People walking down the street
A cat stretching
A spider spinning its web
A spider wrapping up its prey
Hair in the wind
Shadows flickering
Fire
Candlelight
A bride's dress
A pulse
A drum beat
A conductor's wand
A musician's fingers
A slowly widening smile
My mother's hands

This is fluency!

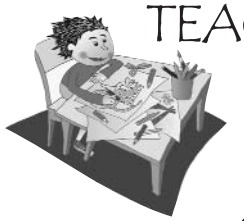
Fluency as "Come Alive" Poetry

Introduce poetry your students can act out. Good possibilities for "come alive" poetry that you dramatize on your feet come from Douglas Florian (*Insectlopedia*, *Mammalabilia*, *Beast Feast Zoo's Who*) or Shel Silverstein. Read a line and ask students to repeat it, moving, using arms, hands, eyes, and facial ex-

pressions to bring the poem to life. One poem I love is Douglas Florian's "Army Ants," from *Insectlopedia* (1998, p. 13). You will get the idea immediately if you stand up, right now, and march—left, right, left right—as you read aloud. This is a marching poem with a strong beat, and students love it. They can perform it in small groups or as a whole class. It is short, so they learn it quickly, but you can say a line first and then have your students repeat (the echo effect only enhances the rhythm):

Left
  Right
Left
  Right
We're army ants.
We swarm.
  We fight.
We have no home.
We roam.
We race.
You're lucky if
We miss your place.

A suggestion: To suggest an army of ants coming from far away, descending upon you, then fading into the distance, start the left-right, left-right in a whisper, slowly building to a crescendo. Then fade out again to a whisper at the end. Ask students to actually march around the room as they recite the poem. The marching feels good, and it reinforces the idea of fluency.



TEACHING CONVENTIONS CONCEPTUALLY

What are conventions, really? Rules, many student writers would say. (This is often what we think, too.) Actually, the word *conventions* signifies "traditions, customs, protocol"—the thing to do.

Conventions as Customs

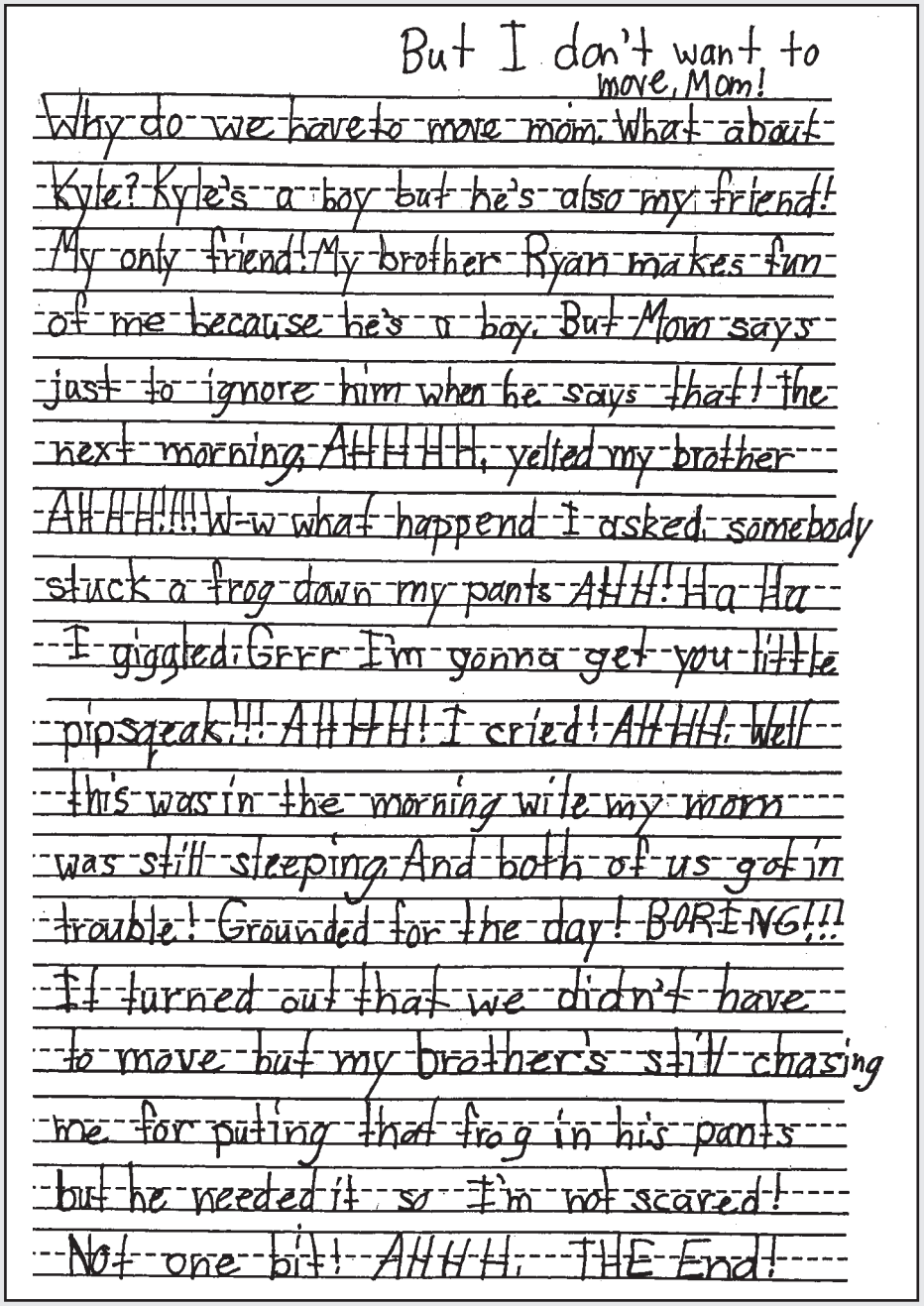
Custom and tradition are woven through almost every part of our life. Ask your students to think about customs or traditions that go with eating a meal. These days, we usually eat with silverware, for example, not with our fingers—it was not always so! We eat from plates and bowls. Why? How do you suppose that became a mealtime convention? Each time your students identify a convention or custom, ask why? Why did that become the custom?

Look at other situations, too. Sports, for instance, are riddled with conventions. Conventions are the rules of the game in baseball, basketball, or whatever. But what of other conventions? Today it is customary to wear uniforms, have coaches, limit the numbers of players who can participate at once (whole towns once played football), limit the time of the game (once they played until everyone was wounded or exhausted), or have fans sit on the sidelines (years ago, "fans" and players were inseparable).

How about driving? What are the customs or conventions that govern our behavior on the road? What happens if we violate them? How about shopping

Figure 3.3

Expanding control over conventions. Jamie (2)

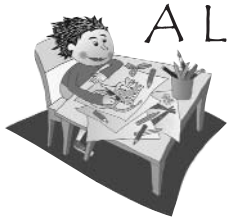


But I don't want to move, Mom!

Why do we have to move mom. What about Kyle? Kyle's a boy but he's also my friend! My only friend! My brother Ryan makes fun of me because he's a boy. But Mom says just to ignore him when he says that! the next morning, AHHHH, yelled my brother AHHH!!! W-w what happend I asked. somebody stuck a frog down my pants AHH! Ha Ha I giggled. Grrr I'm gonna get you little pipsqeak!!! AHHH! I cried! AHHH. Well this was in the morning wile my morm was still sleeping. And both of us got in trouble! Grounded for the day! BORING!!! It turned out that we didn't have to move but my brother's still chasing me for puting that frog in his pants but he needed it so I'm not scared! Not one bit! AHHH. THE End!

at the grocery store? Visiting the library? Riding the bus? Walking a dog in the park? Dressing for school? Sitting in class? The possibilities are endless. The point is to help students see, first, what conventions *are* (customs or approved ways of doing things) and, second, how conventions *came to be* (to make life easier, to make people comfortable, and so on).

To consider conventions in writing, begin with writing that is as convention-free as you can make it. Write letters backward and upside down. Put no spaces between words. Spell words irregularly. Omit words, letters, or punctuation marks. Write from the bottom of the page up or right to left. Then ask your students the key question: Why? Why wouldn't it work if everyone wrote this way? Conventions evolve to make our lives, including our writing lives, easier.



A LESSON IN ANATOMY VERSUS JUST DOING IT

The lessons in this chapter, of course, are not a support, not a substitute for writing. Writers have to write. All the time.

Several years ago I watched a western horsemanship instructor giving a group of seven-year-olds their first lesson. They were excited when she led an ornery old paint horse, Willie, out in front of them, and it was obvious from their expressions that in *their* eyes Willie was not a broken down, sway-backed, best-days-behind-him nag. He was flat-out beautiful. They were virtually quivering with anticipation, wondering who would be the first to take Willie around the arena. They wanted to touch him and make friends, to climb aboard and storm the track and win ribbons—but they had been instructed to "stay on the benches."

Excitement dissolved into tedium as it became increasingly apparent that the teacher's intent—at least for lesson one—was to hold off on any actual riding until everyone had mastered the "anatomy of the horse." Her circle of pupils sat stone-faced and rigid as she pointed to various spots on old Willie's legs, head, shoulders, and back and asked the "riders" in turn to supply the correct terminology. "When do we get to ride?" one of her more intrepid pupils finally asked. The instructor looked vaguely perturbed, remarkably unaware that she had lost the attention and enthusiasm of her class.

Before they left (looking considerably less excited than when they had come in), the instructor handed each student a homework sheet with a sketch of a horse and arrows leading to "parts of the horse" labels many of them could not read. These were to go home to parents for more drill and practice. I was willing to bet the class would be smaller the following week—but then, perhaps that is what she was hoping for. After all, she had eight pupils and only four horses. Teaching is almost always like that.

I was lucky—I didn't have that instructor. Becky, who sat a horse as if she'd been born on one, taught me to ride. For a time, she didn't provide much direct instruction at all. She watched me ride, and she rode with me and asked me to watch her. She and the horse moved as one; I wanted to ride like that—to move like that. I wanted to stop bumping up and down, inelegantly smacking the saddle and feeling my feet fall sloppily out of the stirrups. As I think back now to her instruction, I feel the best word to describe it would be *subtle*. She didn't write evaluations or give me points for heel extension or drill me on terminology. She encouraged me to *ride*—in fact, I was on top of a horse within five minutes of meeting her. "Imagine," she would say, "that your legs are so long they could reach clear around the horse and meet underneath." I literally felt my legs grow. "Imagine," she told me, "that every move you make is felt by the horse and interpreted as a signal of where

you want to go." And as soon as she said it, I felt it happening. Over time, she taught me about keeping my hands quiet, reading a horse's ears, thinking "down and back" when loping, keeping a center of balance so that I could ride with my eyes closed, extending my legs so that the weight would go into my heels, and feeling the horse's feet move beneath me. We never did get to the anatomy lesson, but I learned anatomy anyway. I do not remember that part of her instruction at all. What I do remember—what I will *never* forget—is Becky saying, "Trust yourself. Go with the flow." Great teachers encourage and suggest—then they trust.

CHAPTER 3 IN A NUTSHELL

- Trait-based instruction is centered around writers' language. For this reason, it is not a curriculum unto itself, nor a new way of teaching writing. It is a way of *thinking* about writing that supports process-based writing instruction.
- Because traits (characteristics of strong writing) are inherent in every piece of good writing, they are necessarily embedded in writing instruction, even when we do not realize we are teaching them.
- Understanding the core meaning of a trait, what it truly is that we are teaching, enables us to teach each trait conceptually—to teach the fundamental meaning behind the trait.
- Ideas are about imagination, pictures in the mind, clarity of meaning, or a central message.
- Organization is about patterning, grouping, planning—creating a sense of direction.
- Voice is individuality, personality, mood, expression, and connection to an audience—the right tone of voice for the message and the moment.
- Word choice is about precision, hitting the target, relying on verbs instead of modifiers, and using words that paint pictures in a reader's mind.
- Fluency is rhythm, grace, flow, music to the ears, going for the sound and not just the literal meaning.
- Conventions are traditions, customs, protocol, the sum of what's expected and accepted—whether in writing or in any context.
- Writers learn to write by doing it. The traits, therefore, are not an end in themselves but a means to making writing practice richer and more purposeful.

STUDY GROUP: INTERACTIVE QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. **Activity and discussion.** Without looking back, ask yourself, "What is the main thing I am trying to teach, conceptually, for each trait?" Can you answer this in writing? If you can, you are ready to teach them. If you cannot, take time to review as necessary. Then try it again, working with a partner. If you can, expand my list of ways to teach each trait conceptually.
2. **Discussion.** Think back on the writing instruction you received as a student. What was it like? Which of the two "riding instructors" did you encounter most often? Describe one experience, positive or negative, for your group: What was it like and how did it affect you as a writer—and then as a teacher?
3. **Activity and discussion.** How would you analyze your own style of teaching? Begin with the following checklist and then expand your thoughts with a short paragraph, being as objective as you can. Be prepared to present your self-analysis to your study group.

   Check each one that describes you, your teaching style, or your teaching philosophy:

   ___ I believe children learn to write by writing.

   ___ I believe children need some basic instruction in writing skills before doing any significant writing.

   ___ Primary students can and should write, in some form, from the very first day of school.

   ___ Students are ready to write when they can form whole sentences and spell a few high-frequency words correctly.

   ___ Young children benefit from seeing me model writing—and then doing it themselves.

   ___ Young children have much to teach each other about writing. They need to talk and share.

   ___ Very young students cannot distinguish between strong and ineffective writing. We need to tell them which writing is good.

   ___ Young students can comprehend the concepts of clear message, voice, and organization even before they know how to incorporate those things into their own writing.

   ___ In order to teach trait-based writing effectively, I need to understand the traits inside and out myself.

___ The way in which I talk about writing—including my students' own work—influences significantly the way they think about writing.
___ A writing classroom may sometimes look noisy and somewhat chaotic, but be highly productive.
___ The most productive writing classroom is one in which children are sitting quietly, attending to their writing.
___ In a successful writing classroom, each child's work will reflect an individual and unique voice.
___ Ideas and voice—expression and individuality—are the heart and soul of good writing.
___ Conventional correctness is the foundation of good writing, though other qualities are also important.

Add your own thoughts to the profile you have created with this checklist.

4. **Activity and discussion.** What would you say to a teacher who said, "The six traits have nothing to do with my writing curriculum"? Write a short (two to three brief paragraphs) response directly to this hypothetical teacher. Be prepared to share your response aloud with your study group.
5. **Discussion.** What, specifically, are the advantages in introducing primary students to the traits by teaching them conceptually, as opposed to simply handing out checklists or scoring students' work? Discuss this with your group.

SOURCES CITED

Angelou, Maya, 1993. *Life Doesn't Frighten Me.* New York: Stewart, Tabori, and Chang.

Bragg, Rick. 2001. *Ava's Man.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Bunting, Eve. 1995. *Smoky Night.* San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Calkins, Lucy McCormick. 1994. *The Art of Teaching Writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Cannon, Jannell. 1997. *Verdi.* San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Child, Lauren. 2003. *I Am Too Absolutely Small for School.* Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

Collard, Sneed B. III. 1997. *Animal Dads.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Fletcher, Ralph. 1997. *Twilight Comes Twice.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Florian, Douglas. 1998. *Insectlopedia.* San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Graves, Donald. 1983. *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Jenkins, Steve. 2005. *Actual Size.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Juster, Norton. 2005. *The Hello, Goodbye Window.* New York: Hyperion Books for Children.

Lamott, Anne. 1995. *Bird by Bird.* New York: Doubleday.

Lane, Barry. 2002. *The Tortoise and the Hare Continued . . .* Shoreham, VT: Discover Writing Press.

Lane, Barry, and Gretchen Barnabei. 2001. *Why We Must Run with Scissors: Voice Lessons in Persuasive Writing.* Shoreham, VT: Discover Writing Press.

Lichtenheld, Tom. 2000. *Everything I Know About Pirates.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

McGuane, Thomas. 2000. *Some Horses.* New York: Random House.

Morrison, Toni (with Slade Morrison). 1999. *The Big Box.* New York: Hyperion Books for Children.

Murray, Donald M. 2004. *A Writer Teaches Writing.* Boston: Heinle.

Newkirk, Thomas. 1989. *More than Stories: The Range of Children's Writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Olshansky, Beth. 2006. *Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art and Image-Making Within the Writing Process.* Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire.

Palatini, Margie. 2000. *Bedhead.* New York: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Paulsen, Gary. 1993. *Dogteam.* New York: Delacorte Press.

Pitcher, Carolyn. 2004. *Lord of the Forest.* London, England: Frances Lincoln Children's Books.

Pulver, Robin. 2003. *Punctuation Takes a Vacation.* New York: Holiday House.

Romano, Tom. 1995. *Writing with Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Rylant, Cynthia. 1998. *Scarecrow.* New York: Harcourt.

Scieszka, Jon. 1995. *Math Curse.* New York: Viking Press.

Shannon, David. 2004. *Alice the Fairy.* New York: Scholastic.

Spandel, Vicki. 2005. *The 9 Rights of Every Writer.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Steig, William. 1996. *The Toy Brother.* New York: HarperCollins.

Walker, Alice. 2006. *There Is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me.* New York: HarperCollins.

Willems, Mo. 2004. *Knuffle Bunny.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Figure 3.1 was inspired by the work of Beth Olshansky: www.picturingwriting.org