9 Troubleshooting: Dealing with Common Writing Problems

Being a writer is hard work, and perhaps this is the first thing we should share with students. I agree with Marjorie Frank when she says, "Students should be told about the energy it takes to write" (1995, p. 92). In the end, nothing takes the place of writing, writing, writing. Nevertheless, as writing coaches, we can help to diagnose various kinds of writing troubles and provide some direct help.

> *I hate to tell ya, but there's no easy answer. If you want discipline you have to keep slowly adding, building, and staying with it until one day, doing it feels better than not doing it. It's like doing sit-ups.*
>
> **—Nancy Slonim Aronie**
> *Writing from the Heart,* 1998, p. 103

While Chapter 8 dealt with strategies for teaching traits in the context of a process-based curriculum, this chapter offers more of a "Dear Trait Person" approach—which is to say, things teachers have found helpful when specific problems arise. At the close of

> *Writing is about hypnotizing yourself into believing yourself, getting some work done, then unhypnotizing yourself and going over the work coldly. There will be many mistakes, many things to take out, and others that need to be added.*
>
> **—Anne Lamott**
> *Bird by Bird,* 1995, p. 114

> *After fifty years of writing, I have pretty much gotten over my fear of writing. Not all, but most of it. I wouldn't want to get over all of it. A little terror is stimulating. Writing is important, and you can say something that is wrong, stupid, silly, clumsy. And you will.*
>
> **—Donald M. Murray**
> *Shoptalk,* 1990, p. 69

this chapter I also will suggest some strategies that are effective with challenged writers or with students who have been through trait-based instruction before.

IDEAS

Problem: The information is too skimpy! This paper doesn't say anything.

■ Strategies

1. *Share students' own voices.* Many students who start out believing that they have nothing to say feel differently when they encounter the voices of peers. Suddenly they are inspired to share thoughts about how it feels to be a young person today, the joys (and headaches) of driving, depression, tattoos, "instructions for life," loneliness and alienation, cultural awareness, parents and grandparents, music, work, envy, poverty, love and loss, friendship and betrayal, cosmic truth, violence, self-esteem, and memories. These topics are not mine. They are the selected topics of students assembled in a remarkable little book called, *You Hear Me? Poems and Writing by Teenage Boys* (2000), edited by Betsy Franco. Not many students will tune out when you share Nick's account of growing up with Tourette syndrome, which begins, "It all started in second grade. There was this kid and he would jump on my desk and chair. He also would call me inappropriate things. My teacher would say, Stay away from him. I said, *He* comes to *me.* She didn't care" (p. 20).

As third grader José discovered, poetry sometimes springs from mundane events. He said, "I have nothing to write about," but found that he did (see Figure 9.1).

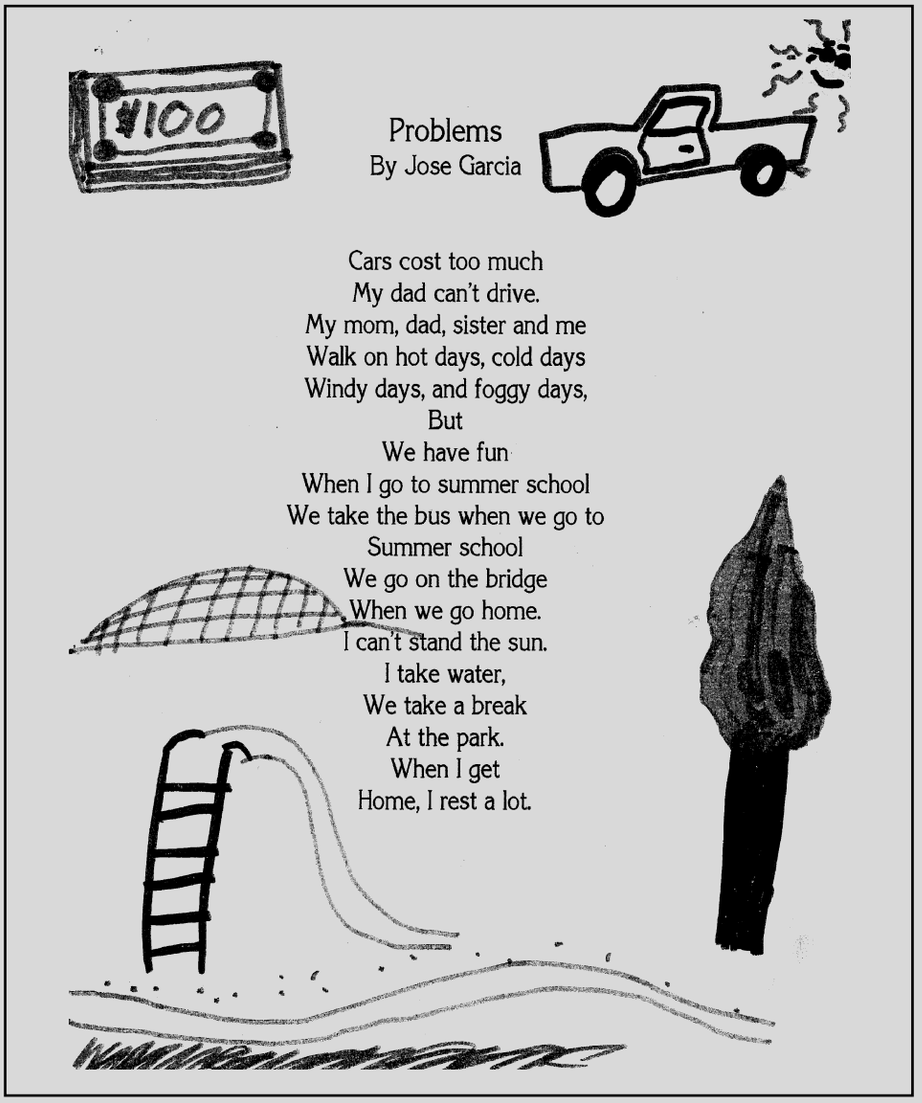
2. *Go beyond stories.* Not all young writers feel comfortable as storytellers. We also need to read good nonfiction aloud, prompting them to try another genre, too. Here are some of my favorites to get you started; asterisks mark those well suited to younger reader-writers:

> I loathe writing stories. The plot nearly kills me. *Possum Magic* took five years to perfect, and the book that followed, *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*, was such torture to write that I thought I'd never write again. . . . being a writer has helped me understand that story writing is one of the most difficult of all the writing acts. I now tap into kids' concerns and their memories . . . instead of burdening them with a task that makes me quail.
>
> **—Mem Fox**
>
> *Radical Reflections,* 1993, p. 37

- ✔ Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (1995)
- ✔ Jennifer Armstrong, *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World* (1998)
- ✔ Bill Bryson, *In a Sunburned Country* (2001)
- ✔ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (1995)
- ✔ Sneed B. Collard III, *The Deep-Sea Floor** (2003)
- ✔ Margery Facklam, *Spiders and Their Web Sites** (2001)
- ✔ Twig C. George, *Jellies: the Life Jellyfish** (2000)
- ✔ Twig C. George, *Seahorses** (2003)
- ✔ Laura Hillenbrand, *Sea Biscuit* (2001)
- ✔ Stephen King, *On Writing* (2000)
- ✔ Julius Lester, *To Be a Slave* (1998)
- ✔ Bill Nye, *The Science Guy's Big Blast of Science** (1963)
- ✔ David M. Schwartz, *G Is for Googol** (1998)
- ✔ David M. Schwartz, *Q Is for Quark** (2001)
- ✔ Charles Seife, *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (2000)

3. *Make it fun.* For dozens of ideas on finding and reporting information with style and energy, I recommend Barry Lane's book, *51 Wacky We-Search Reports* (2003). Barry shows how to

FIGURE 9.1 *"Problems," by José Garcia*



put life into the old research report by borrowing sales techniques, creating want ads or posters, writing parody, doing job interviews and talk shows, and otherwise making use of professional writers' proven skills. Personification and role playing can be effective ways for students to show off their knowledge. In "Freddy: A Day in the Life of a Neuron," for example, the student writes, "Freddy was especially fond of Nervana, the neuron nearest to him, whose dendrites were only a synapse away. Many a time he passed messages from his axon to her dendrites but she remained aloof" (p. 89).

4. *Take ten.* An inordinate amount of difficulty with writing comes from sheer procrastination. Here's a way to fight it. Gather around you all the notes (if any) from which you will draw your information. Write the very best lead

When I wrote reports in school I used a dump truck. I'd take my dump truck to the library, fill it up with facts, and then backload it onto the paper. . . . I didn't know that facts were fun, that facts were funny. Did you know, for example, that a hummingbird's heart is half the size of its body? That the Roman legions used urine as laundry detergent?

—Barry Lane

51 Wacky We-Search Reports, 2003, p. 13

you can. Then set a timer for ten minutes, and within that time, write the most complete report your knowledge of the topic allows. Beginning to end: you *must finish*. Here's the trick, though: Write on *every other line*, and once you've finished, go back and use questions to identify gaps where you will need to expand your thinking or add detail. You now have a barebones structure and (if your questions are good) a sense of direction for further writing. Best of all, you have silenced that insidious, accusatory voice: "Your masterpiece is due tomorrow and *you* haven't even written one pathetic line, oh time waster!"

5. *Leave some writing unfinished at the end of the day.* A little trick I have learned is to stop in the middle of a paragraph—or even the middle of a line. It allows me to plunge right in the next day, to get the wheels turning. That first line is always the toughest; finishing a line or paragraph I had begun is easier than starting from scratch. Like many writers, I also find it helpful to write at the same time and for a certain length of time.

6. *Draw.* Some writers start right in putting words on paper. For others, drawing works well because it documents detail and stimulates thinking. Notice Logan's sketch (see Figure 9.2) of Mrs. Pratchett [based on Roald Dahl's book, *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (1984)]. Logan has effectively captured Mrs. Pratchett's surly disposition, not to mention her promi-

FIGURE 9.2 *"Mrs Pratchett," by Logan*

> *If you give me an eight-page article and I tell you to cut it to four pages, you'll howl and say it can't be done. Then you'll go home and do it, and it will be much better. And after that comes the hard part: cutting it to three.*
>
> **—William Zinsser**
>
> *On Writing Well*, 2001, p. 18

> *I try to leave out the parts that people skip.*
>
> **—Elmore Leonard**
>
> In James Charlton, *The Writer's Quotation Book*, 1992, p. 27

> *Think small. The best things to write about are often the tiniest things—your brother's junk drawer, something weird your dog once did, your grandma's loose, wiggly neck, changing a dirty diaper, the moment you realized you were too old to take a bath with your older brother.*
>
> **—Ralph Fletcher**
>
> *What a Writer Needs*, 1993, p. 162

> *One thing that will make it easier to get started is to write three leads to your paper, instead of agonizing over one that must be perfect.*
>
> **—Bruce Ballenger**
>
> *The Curious Researcher*, 1994, p. 168

nent mustache. Older writers may be reluctant to sketch, thinking that this is a habit they should have abandoned years prior. Not so. Ever get an idea while doodling on a napkin in a restaurant? Then you know. Pass it on.

Problem: There's too much information. Help! It's huge.

■ *Strategies*

1. *Cut the copy in half.* Ask wordy writers to imagine they're writing for a newspaper and can only fill so many inches on the page. Ask them to cut the copy they have by half *without losing content*. That's the trick.

2. *Whittle big topics down to size.* Wordy, rambling writing is often triggered by a topic that's just too big to get hold of. For instance, *baseball* is too big, so let's skinny it down:

- ✔ *How to pitch* (Better—but not there yet)
- ✔ *How to throw a fastball* (Focusing in)
- ✔ *How to pitch against the best hitter in the league* (Almost small enough)
- ✔ *How to pitch under pressure: a 3-2 count and a cramp in your back* (That's it!)

Now, instead of "Pitching can be a challenge," I can write, "The secret to good pitching is seeing the strike zone as the whole world. You have to tune out the pain, the numbness in your legs, the screams of the fans—even the piercing eyes of the league's champion batter, willing you to blow it."

ORGANIZATION

Problem: My students still have problems with leads.

■ *Strategies*

1. *Make multiple leads routine.* Students rarely write multiple leads for their own work. This is unfortunate because this practice needs to be a habit. Ask each student to write three to five potential leads for a given piece of his or her own writing. Share the leads in writing groups. Ask peers to identify the leads they like best and to say why.

2. *Offer options.* For some students, sample leads are enough. Others need a concrete list of "Ways to Begin." Here are a few:

- ✔ An anecdote that frames what the paper is about
- ✔ A startling fact that will wake your readers up

- ✔ A question to readers (maybe the question that prompted your paper)
- ✔ An intriguing quotation from someone connected to the topic
- ✔ Action, action, action
- ✔ Dialogue that raises the issue you will explore
- ✔ A promise to readers; e.g., "You'll be a cook within one week!"
- ✔ A striking description that sets the scene
- ✔ A striking image that provides information or sets the tone
- ✔ A summary of a problem—to which the paper offers a solution
- ✔ A profile of someone key to the story or the research

3. *Go bad on purpose.* Shake out the cobwebs by writing bad leads for one or more of the books you are reading. For example:

- ✔ *Hi, I'm E. B. White, and I want to tell you the story of Charlotte the spider and her friend Wilbur. Ready? Here we go!*
- ✔ *Do you like chocolate? In this story you'll learn about a determined boy named Charlie and the way chocolate changed his life.*
- ✔ *It was a dark and stormy night. Ahab paced the deck, smoking his pipe. Somewhere out there lurked Moby. Moby-Dick. But where?*

Host a "Bad Leads" award ceremony, where you can have some fun reading these aloud and voting for the worst of the lot: "Lead Least Likely to Get a Reader's Attention," "Most Action-Free Lead," "Most Obnoxiously Perky Lead," and so on.

4. *Go for the kill.* Want a killer lead? You need killer detail. Weak leads are spawned by scant information. This activity yields striking results because of its immediacy. Students create information right on the spot and then sift through that information for a striking moment that will pull a reader in.

Ask students, in pairs, to *interview* each other for three minutes each. Encourage them to avoid dead-end questions (e.g., *When were you born? What is your middle name?*—Who cares?) and to ask the kinds of questions that will yield intriguing information:

- ✔ What bugs you?
- ✔ What did you fear most in your life that never actually happened?
- ✔ Where would you least (or most) like to be stranded for a week?
- ✔ If you were afraid, what would you be?
- ✔ If you could spend a day with one person, living or dead, who would it be?
- ✔ What is one thing most people would never guess when they first met you?
- ✔ What film or book comes closest to describing you?

> *Therefore your lead must capture the reader immediately and force him to keep reading. It must cajole him with freshness or novelty, or paradox, or humor, or surprise, or with an unusual idea, or an interesting fact, or a question. Anything will do, as long as it nudges his curiosity and tugs at his sleeve.*
>
> **—William Zinsser**
>
> *On Writing Well*, 2001, p. 56

Then ask them to pull out the most intriguing detail on which to base a lead. Read results aloud. Compare them to a few biographical leads you track down in your school library. Which are stronger?

Problem: Trying to follow this writing is like running through a giant maze.

■ *Strategies*

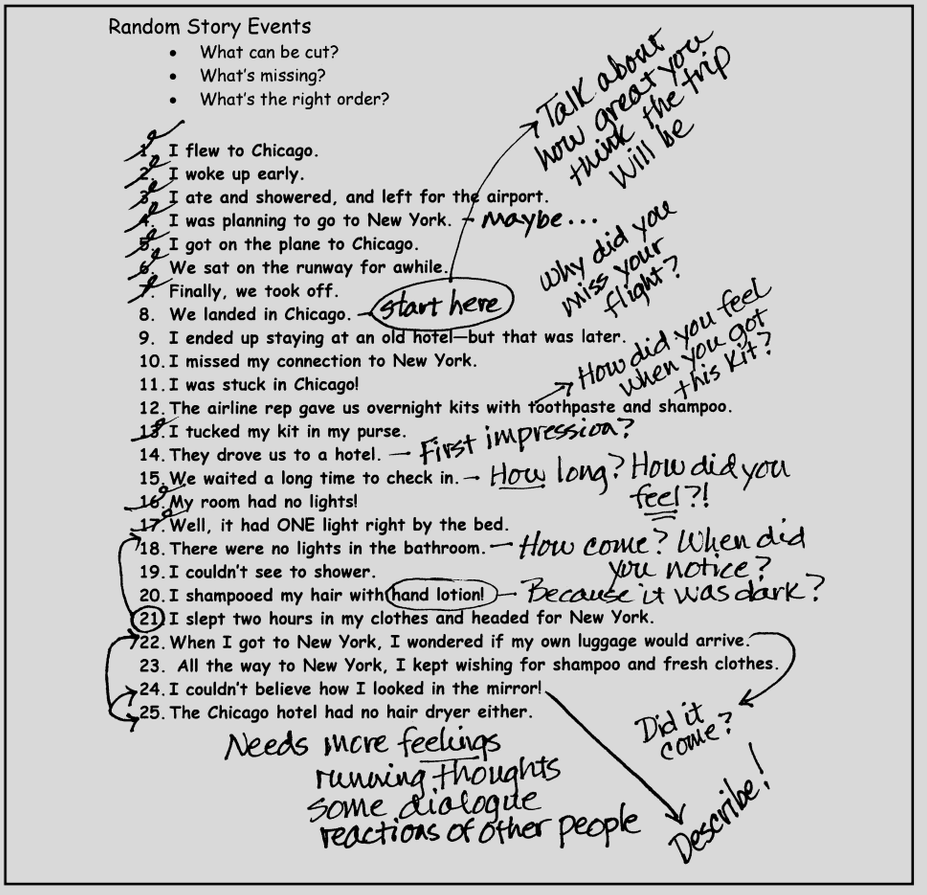
1. *Clean the attic.* The steps in organizing a piece of writing are very similar to those in organizing a closet or an attic: Get rid of what you don't need, group the rest (so that you could find something if you needed to), and figure out what's missing so that you can add it to your collection. For an expository piece, brainstorm a list of details, asking students to help, based on what they know. Print out your list, and cut it into strips. Then ask students, in groups of three, to "clean the attic"—delete what does not matter and group what is left into chunks (just the way you'd put the attic stuff on shelves). Then make a list of "What's Still Needed," things a writer would need to research later.

2. *Tell it orally first.* Talking is an excellent organizational strategy because it's fairly quick and because the speaker can see at once if listeners are puzzled or are following along with ease. This is harder, usually, with writing, where the audience may not see the writing for a time. Practice with a story first. You can model this yourself. Think of something unusual, frightening, funny, or otherwise significant that has happened to you in the past year. Tell the story to your students. Then list everything that happened on an overhead, including a few details you *don't* need (what time you got up, what TV show you were watching when the phone rang, what you had for lunch). List events in random order, and omit one or two important details. See Figure 9.3 for an example based on my overnight adventure in a strange city. As you can see, I have asked students to eliminate what is not needed, reorder what is left, and ask questions to fill in what is missing. This strategy works for any piece of writing, any genre.

3. *Plan it like a road trip.* Outlining isn't a bad idea if we use it well. Like a map that charts new territory, an outline can keep you from getting lost on your journey. But you do not want to be a slave to an outline—or a road map. Good writers understand that organization is organic. Each sentence, paragraph, or chapter flows out of what came before, just as road trip plans sometimes change based on experience. Teach students to outline in general terms that will allow flexibility. For example, if I am writing an informational piece (on any topic at all), my outline might look like this: (1) Opening that startles and informs the reader, (2) quick summary of the main question I mean to answer or the reason I think this topic is important, (3) two or three of the most intriguing things I learned from my research, (4) confirmation or rejection of one or two commonly held beliefs about this topic, (5) something to connect this topic to the reader's life so that he or she will care, (6) a closing surprise—intriguing fact, quotation, or discovery from my own research. This outline is specific enough to guide me (like a good map) without telling me exactly where I can or cannot go. We recognize the organic nature of organization when we routinely ask our students as part of writers' workshop, "Where did your writing take you today that you did not expect to go?"

4. *Use graphic organizers.* Students who are visual often find organizers in picture form infinitely helpful. See *Writer's Express* (Kemper, Nathan, Elsholz, and Sebranek, 2003) and *Write Source 2000* (Sebranek, Kemper, and

FIGURE 9.3 *Random Story Events*



Meyer, 2004) for several innovative and extraordinarily helpful examples that support various forms of organization, e.g., chronological, comparison-contrast, cause-effect.

5. *Look for clues.* As we write, we create expectations in the mind of the reader—we are planting seeds in the reader's mind. When Louis Sachar introduced the yellow-spotted lizard on page 4 of his novel *Holes* (2000), he knew very well what a crucial role this reptilian villain would play. And how disappointed we readers would have been not to have the lizard show his scaly face again.

Before you can learn to leave good clues yourself, you must learn to look for them as you read. So begin there. Ask your students to look for the clues good writers have left along the trail—clues a thoughtful reader tracks right up to the all but inevitable ending. A good ending may not be happy, but it always feels right and always grows out of what has come before. This is why Ahab couldn't just settle down in Nantucket and open a nautical supply store.

In *The Tale of Despereaux* (2003), a charming fairy tale featuring a princess, an arrogant king, a very courageous mouse, and a diabolically evil rat,

author Kate DiCamillo deliberately explains how in any fine piece of writing, all things are connected, and no detail stands in isolation:

> The rat's soul was set afire, and because of this, he journeyed upstairs, seeking the light. Upstairs, in the banquet hall, the Princess Pea spotted him and called out the word "rat," and because of this Roscuro [the rat] fell into the queen's soup. And because the rat fell into the queen's soup, the queen died. You can see, can't you, how everything is related to everything else? [pp. 117–118].

6. *Give "beginning, middle, and end" a face lift.* We know what a *beginning* is: a lead, a hook, a way of getting the reader's attention. Similarly, an *ending* is a resolution of the problem—or sometimes a confession that resolution will be hard to achieve. But what the heck is a *middle?* It's the writer's way of answering questions or expanding ideas raised by the lead, and guiding the reader toward the intended resolution. My suggested face lift, then, is a vision of organizational structure adapted from Barry Lane (1999, p. 37):

Endings grow from beginnings and reveal themselves through clues within the story, characters, or ideas.

—Barry Lane

Reviser's Toolbox, 1999, p. 39

Set-Up (*Beginning*), Exploration (*Middle*), Wrap-Up (*End*)

- ✔ **Set up** what follows, simultaneously drawing the reader in.
- ✔ **Explore** by expanding the main message—and pulling the reader in deeper. Present problems and proposed solutions, details the reader needs for understanding, explanations, complexities, the little details (zooming in), counter-arguments, or (in the case of narrative) the unraveling plot. Move forward through action, character development, information, or argument. Then, zap—
- ✔ **Wrap it up.** End with a revelation, resolution of the conflict or problem, discovery, moment of truth. Say goodbye.

Problem: Transitions Are Weak or (Help!) Missing Altogether.

■ *Strategies*

1. *Invent your own transitions.* Choose a published piece with strong transitions, and rewrite it with all transitional phrases missing. Ask students to fill in transitional words and phrases that make sense. This passage comes from *Jack's Black Book* (Jack Gantos, 1999). In this scene, Jack is taking an aptitude test and has broken his pencil. The rigid Mr. Ploof will not allow him to start over or use a sharpener because the rules say he "must keep going." See if you can fill in the blanks:

> I didn't have a pencil sharpener __ I began to gnaw at the wood around the lead, spitting out the pulp, ____ I exposed the blunt end. I felt even more like a white laboratory rat, ____ I pulled myself together and raced through the test. _____ it didn't seem too difficult or take very long _____ I got off to a rough start [p. 16].

The missing words and phrases, in order, are *so, until, but, For something so important,* and *even though.* You might not have chosen those very words (your students might not either), but could you come up with words that linked the ideas together logically? If so, you understand the importance of connecting ideas—that's the point of the lesson. (Read this piece aloud without the transitional words and phrases to appreciate their importance.)

2. *Brainstorm a list of good transitional words and phrases: However, In a while, Therefore, Next, Because of that, In fact, On the other hand, To tell*

the truth, *For example*, *Nevertheless*, and so forth. Make a poster from which student writers can "borrow" when they need a way to link ideas. For a longer, more complete list, see *Write Source 2000* (Sebranek, Kemper, and Meyer, 2003, p. 106).

Problem: Conclusion? What conclusion? It just stops. Wait—no, not that! Not the dreaded dream ending!

The perfect ending should take your readers slightly by surprise and yet seem exactly right.

—William Zinsser

On Writing Well, 2001, p. 65

■Strategies

1. *Imagine yourself saying goodbye.* A good ending feels so right because it gracefully says goodbye to the reader, much the way you might say goodbye at the door after visiting with a friend. You might comment on what you learned about serving a great Caesar salad or suggest something interesting that you might do the next time you get together. Probably you would *not* say, "So, in summary then, we ate, talked, played cards, played with the dog, and spoke of meeting next week."

2. *Talk about specific ways to end.* Use your own experience along with what you learn from professional writers. Make and post a list:

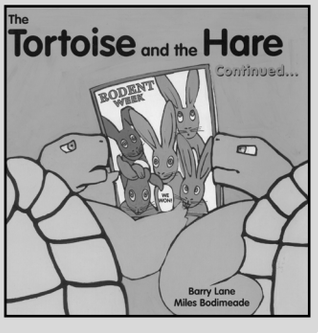
Nice story, Aesop. I love the moral too. Very true, but did you ever wonder what happened the next day, the next year, the next decade?

—Barry Lane

The Tortoise and The Hare Continued . . ., 2002, Introduction

- ✔ Something the writer has learned
- ✔ Something the writer regrets
- ✔ A hint of what's to come
- ✔ The writer's emotional response or observation
- ✔ A comment on how things have changed
- ✔ A stirring image
- ✔ A telling conversation
- ✔ An unexpected twist or revelation
- ✔ An echo of the lead (coming full circle)
- ✔ The answer to a question the reader has likely been pondering

The Tortoise and The Hare Continued . . .



3. *Invent your own bad endings for books you or your students are reading.* There is much to be learned by reminding yourself how not to do it. Remember the "Bad Leads Contest"? Host a similar event for conclusions, creating, with your students, some like these:

- ✔ Then I woke up and it was all a dream. There was no scarlet letter, after all.
- ✔ I hope you liked my book and learned a lot about wizards. . . .
- ✔ So Stanley and all the Yelnatses lived happily ever after. . . .

4. *Use the power of the sequel.* In his book *The Tortoise and The Hare Continued . . .* (2002), author Barry Lane points out that the ending of one piece is merely the beginning of another. Read this book to your students. Then test the theory: Take the ending from one piece of writing and use it to craft the lead for a sequel. After practicing this strategy, your students can

use it to test their own endings. If a conclusion is too dead to give life to a new piece, it probably needs work.

VOICE

Problem: There Is No Voice Here. I've Listened. . . .

■ Strategies

> *Writing from the heart is not just about writing from the heart. It's also about writing from and for all the senses. Readers want to feel, they want to taste, they want to smell.*
>
> **—Nancy Slonim Aronie**
> *Writing from the Heart: Tapping the Power of Your Inner Voice,* 1998, p. 143

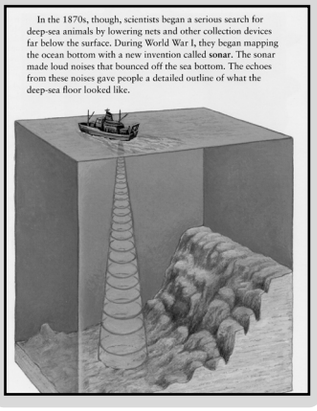
1. *Encourage students to* think *I.* Many teachers object to the use of the personal pronoun *I* in informational or persuasive pieces, and with reason. It's easy for writing to degenerate into a self-serving opportunity to vent: "*I feel that school uniforms are stupid because I hate them.*" The problem is that writing can become *so* impersonal that it is difficult to sense anyone at home within the words: *"One wonders about the motivation underlying school uniforms."* Somewhere between these extremes lies a balance of supported thinking and personal investment: *"Many people were surprised when a recent survey of local middle schools showed attendance soars when students wear uniforms. But—does that mean the students like them? Apparently not."*

William Zinsser suggests that even when the pronoun *I* is not permitted, "it's still possible to convey a sense of I-ness." He recommends writing a first draft with *I then* taking it out, to "warm up your impersonal style" (2001, p. 22)—and *thinking I* even when you cannot use it.

2. *Make it dramatic.* Sneed Collard, a master of nonfiction writing, maintains that the best nonfiction boasts a sense of drama because readers cannot survive on facts alone. His book, *The Deep-Sea Floor* (2003), for example, opens not with a definition or list of facts but with a scene right from an underwater play (facts come on the following page):

> Far from land, a mile below the sea surface, a tripod *fish* rests on the bottom of the ocean. In total darkness, with water temperatures just above freezing, the fish silently waits for a meal. A shrimplike *copepod* (KO-peh-pod) drifts by. The tripod fish lunges and gulps it down . . . [p. 7].

The Deep-Sea Floor



3. *Get someone talking.* We can only plod so long through text in which no one lives, breathes, or speaks. In third-person writing, the writer is—theoretically, anyway—not speaking *right to* the reader. Fine. Quote someone else. This can help to satisfy a reader's natural longing for human contact. William Zinsser (2001) does this with stunning timing, inviting such worthy writers as H. L. Mencken, Garrison Keillor, and Loren Eisley into his conversation about good writing. He wraps up his discussion of the invaluable surprise ending by quoting Woody Allen: *"I'm obsessed,"* Woody says, *"by the fact that my mother genuinely resembles Groucho Marx"* (p. 67). This helps me to remember the point better than if Zinsser had just said, "End on a comic note." We need to teach our students the magic of inviting others into the conversation, too.

4. *Have a good time.* Research writing can be dry, but it's not a requirement. Voice comes, as much as anything, from loving the writing you are doing and daring to be a little playful about it. One writer who seems to be having a really good time is Anne Lamott. I laugh aloud clear through Lamott's books, but the moment that unhinged me was her description of her mother (It could have been mine) reacting to her book: *". . . whenever I show her a copy of my latest book, she gets sort of quiet and teary, and you can tell that what she's feeling is 'Oh, honey, did you made that yourself?' like it's my handprint in clay—which I suppose in many ways it is"* (1995, p. 150).

Go with what comes up. Don't make time for your inner editor to happily announce, "They'll really think you're sick if you write that."

—Nancy Slonim Aronie
Writing From the Heart, 1998, p. 77

5. *Lighten up.* Not everyone can be as funny as Anne Lamott. So it might not be fair to require humor. A respectable first cousin of outright humor is the light touch. Nonfiction writing can become very heavy-handed: *"The Stellar's jay is 11 inches long and makes its home in coniferous forests. Its Latin name is* Cyanocitta stelleri." Such text has a late afternoon in August kind of feel to it. Compare Patricia Lichen's lighter fare: *"I'm not sure who compared Stellar's jays to 'crows in blue suits,' but the description is apt. These birds are in the crow family, and like their basic-black-garbed relatives, they are raucous, bold, and intelligent"* (2001, p. 63). Lichen may not be a comic (at least in her writing), but she invariably sounds friendly, engaged, and bemused by the creatures she writes about. Her voice says, "Pull up a chair—I think you'll find this interesting."

6. *Bring the reader inside.* Our students need to identify the audience to be sure, but if the exercise ends there, we have not accomplished much. This is like noting who is at the front door, then slamming it shut. *Bring the reader in.* Find a way to make him or her at home in the text. Bill Nye has a genius for this. I can open *Big Blast of Science* (1993) to any page and feel as if I have been invited in for tea and physics. Bill helps me relate every topic to my own life: *"As you read these words, you and this book and whatever you're sitting on are being pulled down by gravity. If you're reading in an airplane [I was, actually], the plane is being pulled down by gravity. That's why planes need wings and engines"* (p. 35). I looked out, saw the wing, and felt I *was* defying gravity—Bill had said so. *Ha!*

Even in a bad piece of writing, the mentor reaches into the chaos, finds a place where the writing works, pulls it from the wreckage, names it, and makes the writer aware of this emerging skill with words.

—Ralph Fletcher
What a Writer Needs, 1993, p. 14

7. *Listen for moments.* On partly cloudy days, the sun still shines. Now and then it's hidden behind a cloud, which makes us appreciate its warmth all the more when it returns. Voice comes and goes like that. We need to listen for just those moments and celebrate them by noticing and by commenting. Once you know that your voice has touched someone, it's hard not to want to do it again. This is why writers write, after all. We need to react. Laugh. Gasp. Applaud. Cheer. Then students know their writing and their risk taking have made a difference—if only for a line.

8. *Personalize the topic.* It is no secret why voice is so hard to wring from the writing we get in state assessments: Writers are responding to someone else's topic—and only those who have the luck to land a serviceable topic or the talent to personalize a poor one will succeed in investing their writing with voice. How do you take a topic and make it your own? You stretch it, bend it,

> *The challenge is not to find a unique topic (save that for your doctoral dissertation) but to find an angle on a familiar topic that helps readers see what they probably haven't noticed before.*
>
> **—Bruce Ballenger**
> *The Curious Researcher,* Fourth Edition, 2004, p. 50

> *Whenever I write, whether I'm writing a picture book, an entry in my journal, a course handbook for students, or notes for the milkman, there's always someone on the other side, if you like, who sits invisibly watching me write, waiting to read what I've written. The watcher is always important.*
>
> **—Mem Fox**
> *Radical Reflections,* 1993, p. 9

and coax it into a slightly different form. Once, in writing about a memorable place, a colleague chose "inside her grandson's eyes." Now that is taking the notion of place to a whole new dimension. When writing about "memorable person," students often think, "Who is my best friend right now?" or "Could I write about one of my parents?" There the thinking stops. But there are so many other possibilities: a dangerous driver you encounter on the freeway, a person whose writing you can't get out of your head, an annoying neighbor, the class bully from years ago, an actor whose performance moved you, the inventor of something you value, someone from history you wish you could have met, or a stranger who did a good deed. You've got to move the fenceline out . . . out. . . .

9. *Take voice out.* By taking the voice out of a strong piece, students often discover what made it strong in the first place. A student said one day, "What if the 'The Redwoods' writer had written 'Mouse Alert'?" What indeed? It might have sounded more like this:

> Last year we went to Yellowstone and we had a wonderful time. We stayed in a cabin by a lake and it was fun. The weather was beautiful and sunny so there was lots to do. We were never bored. My parents took pictures for their friends back home. My sister and I swam and hiked in the woods and even caught a mouse! Later we let it go. Then we just ate and had a wonderful time. I hope we go back again next year for an even better time and a chance to see even more creatures than we saw this time.

The student who wrote this needed to think about what created the voice in "Mouse Alert" and what kept voice suppressed in "The Redwoods." Is she more prepared now to put voice into her own writing? Absolutely.

10. *Write to your best listener.* My friend and colleague Sally Shorr, a veteran teacher, offers this excellent piece of advice—which has worked for me and for many students with whom I've shared writing ideas: Think of your *very* best listener, the person in whom you would confide your most important secrets. Write as if you were writing *just to that person.* Who are your own best listeners?

11. *Try role playing.* From Mary Ann Beggs, Melbourne, Florida, comes a knockout idea that combines writing, drama, a bit of historical research, and practice in developing story and character while writing letters. Her students take a given situation and set of characters—say, a pilot writing home during World War II, or a Japanese child in an internment camp writing to a non-Japanese friend during World War II, or students during the 1960s anti-Vietnam war protest marches writing to family members or politicians. Students explore the political realities of the time, research main characters and circumstances (right down to the cost of postage stamps), and develop their characters through letter writing. In Figures 9.4 and 9.5, tenth graders Kendall Irvin and Jessica Pauley create correspondence between William Windrich, a fictional marine in the Korean conflict, and Gloria White, his fictional girlfriend. Notice how their careful research adds to detail and voice in this tiny excerpt from a much larger (and most impressive) research piece. Research references appear parenthetically in each piece.

FIGURE 9.4 *William to Gloria*

September 7, 1950

Gloria,

You don't have to worry about me so much just yet. We aren't even in Korea yet. The officers say we won't reach it until about mid September, which is fine with me. Maybe by then, all them Koreans will have killed each other. Let God sort them out, us Marines say, not us.

I ain't anxious to get there at all. Back in the States before we got on this ship, I met a man returning from Korea. He was British and had been in Korea for weeks fighting for the U.N. (James) He was missing a leg.

I said, "Christ, man, what happened to ya?"

He said, Land mines." (Magerkurth)

"Landmines?" I asked.

He just laughed and it scared me. There was such coldness in his tones. "Hey, boy, I'm one of the lucky ones. You'll see. "

I just walked away then. He gave me the creeps.

You don't pay no mind to your old man. He don't know a thing about politics, or theology. The only reason he knows about this war is because he sits in front of the radio all day drinking. Even with a buzz that's lasted three years you're bound to learn something. You just be careful around him until I get back.

All right, sweet girl—looks like it's lights out here on the ship. Sleep tight, and remember we're under the same stars.

Love,
William

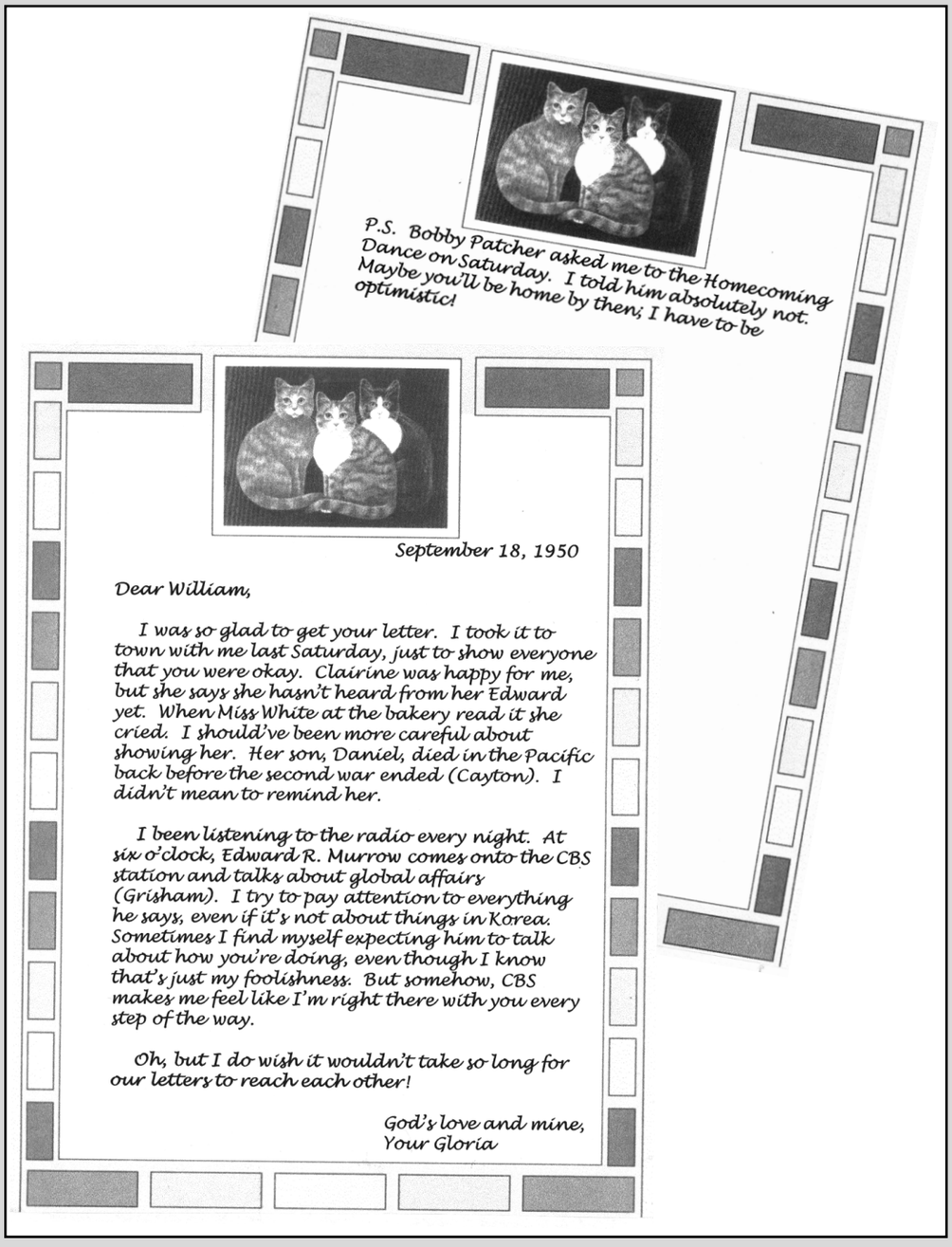
Problem: This voice doesn't work for the topic or the audience.

■ *Strategies*

1. *Switch audiences.* Students only gain a sense of audience by writing for more than one person or group. Ask students to imagine an uncomfortable situation, e.g., receiving a traffic ticket or getting caught in a lie. Then ask them to write about this incident to several different audiences, e.g., a parent, a good friend, a teacher, and a traffic court official. Does the voice change as the audience shifts? Why?

2. *Get an attitude.* Actors often approach a scene from a particular attitude: *"In this scene my friend is being completely unreasonable—so I need to seem increasingly angry."* It helps to do this in writing, too. What attitude are

FIGURE 9.5 *Gloria to William*



you projecting? Helpful? Authoritative? Sorrowful? Joyous? Amazed? Get into the mood of your writing.

3. *Take time to vent.* Almost everyone has an issue with some local business group or other. Express your concerns in letters. The complaint letter is a challenge. You need to hit the right note: serious protest coupled with a

professional, courteous undertone. If your students can hit that just-right blend, they have a leg up on achieving good business voice. Save letters (and responses, if you get them) and compile them into a class book entitled, *Effective Business Voices.*

4. *Interview businesspeople.* If possible, invite local businesspeople into your classroom to talk directly to your students. Find out how they want their employees to come across to the audiences they serve. Don't be surprised to discover that the *quality* of voice—warmth, friendliness, a personal touch—is more valued than ever by many business executives, who regard an ability to communicate with an audience as an essential survival skill in a competitive world. Notice, for instance, how the Xerox Corporation (Brown, 1991) ends its welcoming letter to new employees:

> If you come to work here, you will sacrifice the security of the safe approach in which you can count on arriving at a predictable goal. But you will have an opportunity to express your personal research "voice" and to help create a future that would not have existed without you [p. 105].

You are writing for yourself. Don't try to visualize the great mass audience. There is no such audience—every reader is a different person.

—William Zinsser

On Writing Well, 2001, p. 25

4. *Write for yourself, too.* Wait a minute, you're saying. Aren't we supposed to consider audience? Absolutely. But the writer needs to be part of that audience. We do our best writing when we write something we actually might want to read ourselves a month—or year—from now.

5. *Relax.* Tension is the mortal enemy of voice. If you can relax as you write, the *self* is more likely to emerge. Safety first yields "The Redwoods." No risk, no gain. In the introduction to *Essays That Worked for Business Schools* (1987), authors Boykin Curry and Brian Kasbar summarize the responses of admissions officers—and their observations are telling:

> The overwhelming complaint from undergraduate admissions officers was that reading 13,000 essays on the same few topics . . . is a mind-numbing experience. Most essays are dry and overwritten. They are often "corrected" by so many friends and relatives that the life gets sucked out. . . . Anxious applicants become so afraid of saying the wrong thing that they end up saying nothing. Such sterilization can mean unbearable monotony . . . so don't treat your essay like a psychological minefield. What seems "safe" to you is probably deadly boring to a weary admissions officer [p. 12].

Curry and Kasbar quote one admissions officer in particular who tries to liven up the essays by reading them on his boat for a change of scenery: *"You know what? Even that doesn't help,"* he claims (p. 12). The moral? Relax. Be yourself. Say what you think. Readers appreciate it—and it makes your writing stand out.

WORD CHOICE

Problem: The vocabulary is too simple, too general, too vague.

■ Strategies

1. *Hunt for striking words.* like this passage from Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) because it makes a movie in my mind: *"Dora is stout and pudding-faced, with a small downturned mouth like that of a disappointed baby. Her large black eyebrows meet over her nose, giving her a permanent*

scowl that expresses a sense of disapproving outrage" (p. 57). Words like *pudding-faced* and *disappointed baby* help me to see Dora and make me less likely to invite her to my birthday party. Reading Atwood reminds me that taking time to find the right word is worth it.

2. *Brainstorm a list of "tired" words.* Maybe these words need a permanent rest: *fun* (as an adjective), *awesome*, *great*, *nice*, *bad* (meaning good), *way cool*, *grand*, *great*, *special*, *super*, *downer*, *pushing the envelope*, and so on. For each tired word or expression, brainstorm as many different "ways to say it" as you can think of; *great*, for instance, can be *high-minded*, *noble*, *humane*, *beneficent*, *magnificent*, *kind-hearted*, *just*, *fair*, *lofty*, or *princely*—if we are referring to character. A *great party*, on the other hand, might be *marvelous*, *extraordinary*, *jim-dandy*, *wondrous*, *awe inspiring*, *astounding*, *smashing*, *unprecedented*, *first rate*, *tiptop*, or *stupendous.* Create word walls for younger students, and build your own dictionary of synonyms with older students' help. Student-created dictionaries for younger students work wonders for both groups.

One group of researchers tried to sort out the factors that helped third and fourth graders remember what they had been reading. They found that how interested the students were in the passage was thirty times *more important than how "readable" the passage was.*

—Alfie Kohn

Punished by Rewards, 1993, p. 145

3. *Read above (*well *above) grade level.* This is vital. I would not enjoy being cut off in the bookstore by a clerk who said, "Sorry—you're not ready for that book just yet." *That's* now the one I want. We want the whole world of books open to us. Don't our students deserve the same?

4. *Learn words in context, not in isolation.* Many young elementary students would be hard-pressed to define these words in isolation: *imprison*, *individual*, *invader*, *renew*, *elastic*, *cascade*, *canvas*, *harbor*. In context, though, the words reveal their identity in a way that no vocabulary list can duplicate:

> Our skin is what stands between us and the world. If you think about it, no other part of us makes contact with something not us but the skin. It imprisons us, but also gives us individual shape, protects us from invaders, cools us down or heats us up as need be, produces vitamin D, holds in our body fluids. Most amazing, perhaps, is that it can mend itself when necessary, and it is constantly renewing itself. . . . Skin can take a startling variety of shapes: claws, spines, hooves, feathers, scales, hair. It's waterproof, washable, and elastic. Although it may cascade or roam as we grow older, it lasts surprisingly well. For most cultures, it's the ideal canvas to decorate with paints, tattoos, and jewelry. But most of all, it harbors the sense of touch [Ackerman, 1995, p. 68].

This selection is from Diane Ackerman's *A Natural History of the Senses* (1995), a book most would classify as secondary or adult level. I am not suggesting reading this book in its entirety to younger students—or *any* students. I am suggesting harvesting passages with rich language from *many* sources to share with students of *any* age. Will they recall every word? Perhaps not. So what? They'll recall some, and they'll get a *sense* of the deeper meaning. Language in context is infinitely more powerful than language by list. We must teach it that way.

5. *Predict verbal lifespans.* The Usage Panel for the *American Heritage Dictionary*, which includes teachers, writers, editors, and journalists, meets regularly to discuss what ought or ought not to be considered "acceptable" English: *"Today's spoken garbage may be tomorrow's written gold"* (Zinsser, 2001, p. 42). Among those newer words that made the panel's *useful* list: *cyberspace*, *meltdown*, *skyjacker*, *wetlands*, *software*, *yuppie*, and *fax*. Not all

new words are long-lived, though: *"The 'happenings' of the late 1960s no longer happen, 'out of sight' is out of sight, and even 'awesome' has begun to chill out. The writer who cares about usage must always know the quick from the dead"* (p. 43). What words or phrases are popular with your students right now? Make a book. For each entry, use words in context, and write a short argument (good practice with persuasive writing) predicting whether the word will still be part of English usage in 50 years.

6. *Share your love of language.* What are your own favorite words? Share them with your students. I have a special affinity for *legendary*, *serendipity*, *cosmic*, *luminous*, *candle*, *mystery*, and *sleuth.* They have associations, yes, but beyond this, I just love their sound. Ralph Fletcher calls these "trapdoor" words: *"For some words, the conventional meaning hides a secret trapdoor that leads down to an unexpected or previously forgotten layer of memory underneath"* (1993, p. 39).

Problem: This student suffers from thesaurus-chained-to-the-desk syndrome. Everything's overdone.

■ Strategies

1. *Perform it.* Look up a simple word in the thesaurus (e.g., *slow*). Use the word in a sentence: "Jake moved at a *slow* pace." First, try substituting some alternatives offered by the thesaurus. Then eliminate the need for *adjectives* by making the *verb* stronger:

Jake moved at a *tortoiselike* pace. (Jake *crept.*)

Jake moved at a *leisurely* pace. (Jake *strolled.*)

Jake moved at a *sluggish* pace. (Jake *inched* along.)

Ask students to *act these out.* Writing definitions is nowhere near as powerful as performing them when it comes to driving home subtle changes in meaning.

2. *Enter the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest at San Jose State University.* You'll need to begin by reading excerpts from *It Was a Dark and Stormy Night*, or *Dark and Stormy Night: The Final Conflict*, or any of the zany, hilarious collections of what is considered to be some of the world's most overwritten writing. Here's just one example:

> Daphne ran swiftly across the windswept moor scarcely noticing its heather perfume, down to the rocky cliff where she paused momentarily atop the jagged precipice, looked down at the waves crashing far below, and wished that she had been born anything other than a lemming [Little, 1996, p. 83].

Give your thesaurus-happy students a chance to take a crack at this—you try, too. When you've had your fill of laughing at your overbaked results, send the best of them in to the contest:

Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest
Department of English
San Jose State University
San Jose, CA 95192-0090

Entries are generally only one sentence long and not more than 50 to 60 words.

3. *Keep it to one syllable.* This activity is harder than it sounds, but it definitely tames overwritten text. Ask students to write a paragraph on any topic (e.g., weather report, summary of a math lesson, letter to a friend) in one-syllable words only. No cheating. *"The fog crept through the fields. Sun strove to burst through. . . . "*

Problem: Too Many Modifiers!

■ Strategies

> *I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops. To put it another way, they're like dandelions. If you have one on your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day . . . fifty the day after that . . . and then . . . your lawn is* totally, completely, *and* profligately *covered with dandelions.*
>
> **—Stephen King**
> *On Writing,* 2000, p. 125

1. *Go on a modifier diet.* One of my students once wrote a piece about a sensory-overload deli where the pickles were *tart*, *juicy*, and *crisp;* the corned beef *succulent* and *delectable;* the mustard *tangy* and *refreshing;* and the bread *fluffy* and *fragrant*. Even the clerk was *gracious* and *accommodating*. I felt stuffed without taking a bite. Put yourself on a low-modifier diet, and the same passage might sound like this:

> The pickles snapped when you bit into them, and made your mouth pucker. The bread took you back to grandmother's kitchen. The corned beef required no chewing and the mustard opened even the most resistant sinuses. The clerk always greeted me as if I'd been gone for a month and he'd had nothing of interest to do in my absence.

2. *Spend adverbs frugally.* Adverbs can be useful, but we need to spend them like money. Notice the following examples:

> "He shut the door *forcefully"* versus "He *slammed* the door."
>
> *"She talked* loudly and *shrilly"* versus "She *screeched."*
>
> "Her voice spoke to us *alluringly"* versus "Her voice *seduced* us."

Never let an adverb steal work that should go to a worthy verb.

SENTENCE FLUENCY

Problem: short, choppy sentences break the text up into bite-sized pieces.

■ Strategies

1. *Remember an old friend: sentence combining.* It still works magic. Make your own samples based on creative revisions of famous texts: *Macbeth*, the Constitution, *Winnie the Pooh*, essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amantillado," or "Desiderata":

> Go. Go placidly. Go amidst the noise. Go amidst the haste. Remember things. Remember peace. Peace may exist. Look for it in silence. Be on good terms with people. Feel this way toward all people. But only feel this way as much as possible. Do not surrender.

Alternatively, chop up some text from a cookbook, lawn mower warranty, legal contract, auto show advertisement, or headline news story. Don't forget to compare your students' revisions to the originals.

2. *Turn on the music.* Music illustrates rhythm and flow like nothing else. Make your own selection—rock, rap, jazz, or pop—so long as it has a definite beat and understandable lyrics. Musical lyrics, especially if written by someone gifted such as Randy Newman, Paul Simon, or Stephen Sondheim, can be irresistibly rhythmic. Some lyrics are repetitious, some not. Be careful. Repetition for effect can be stirring; repetition for its own sake is deadly.

Problem: All sentences begin the same way. I think I'm drifting off.

■ Strategies

1. *Ask students to list sentence beginnings*—just the first three or four words—on a separate sheet of paper. Do they all look alike? There's your problem.

2. *Practice variations.* Start with any sentence: *"You have to be clever to survive school."* Ask students to rewrite the sentence as many ways as they can in three minutes (or slightly longer, if you wish). If you like, give students sample sentence beginnings:

Being clever . . .
Surviving school . . .
Survivors . . .
School . . .
Cleverness . . .

Problem: It has variety—but it still sounds mechanical.

■ Strategies

1. *Hit the end note.* Where is the power of the sentence? At the end. In time, most experienced writers learn to embed the most important word or thought right there—like a punch. After awhile, this becomes automatic, but at first, you have to point it out. You have to nurture it, coax it. Which of these sentences has more power?

- ✔ Victor turned, slowly raised the gun, leveled it, and fired.
- ✔ Victor raised the gun, leveled it, and fired, even as he turned.

To a writer's ear, the second sentence simply sounds *wrong*, putting the emphasis on *turning*, not *firing*. Read any piece by Diane Ackerman, John F. Kennedy, Winston Churchill, or Carl Sagan (to name a few fluent writers), and you'll hear your voice automatically marking the rhythm of the sentence endings. It isn't just sentences that are guided by this organizational structure; it's writing itself. Sentences, paragraphs, and whole pieces all drive, relentlessly, toward the rhythm, the force, the power of the end note. This is where you want to embed the most significant words or messages (and it's the *real* reason not to end with a preposition, except when it's awkward not to).

2. *Master parallel structure.* Parallel structure, or *patterning*, in sentences adds the same kind of rhythm that percussion adds to music. Read the

following passage aloud, and hear the rhythm build to a crescendo in the closing line, a masterpiece of parallel structure:

> Lobstermen seek lobsters wherever those creatures may roam, and this means lobstermen chase their prey all over the shallow sea and the cold-water coastline. This means lobstermen are constantly competing with one another for good fishing territory. They get in each other's way, tangle each other's trap lines, spy on each other's boats, and steal each other's information. Lobstermen fight over every cubic yard of the sea. Every lobster one man catches is a lobster another man has lost. It is a mean business, and it makes for mean men. As humans, after all, we become that which we seek. Dairy farming makes men steady and reliable and temperate; deer hunting makes men quiet and fast and sensitive; lobster fishing makes men suspicious and wily and ruthless [Gilbert, 2001, p. 5].

You can teach parallel structure through examples such as this one and through practice. Begin with a piece that is not parallel, and ask students to rework it. Try these yourself:

- ✔ She was tenacious. In addition, her manners weren't very good. What's more, she often scared the living daylights out of us.
- ✔ Some called the January weather in the mountains dangerous. One thing was certain: You couldn't predict it. Though it wasn't always deadly, it had the potential to be deadly at times.

Problem: Endless connectives turn the whole paper into one monstrous "sentence" that chokes to death any sense of meaning.

■ *Strategies*

There is no minimum length for a sentence that's acceptable in the eyes of God. Among good writers, it is the short sentence that predominates. And don't tell me about Norman Mailer—he's a genius. If you want to write long sentences, be a genius.

—William Zinsser

On Writing Well, 2001, p. 72

1. *Encourage the short sentence.* I have often seen assessment rubrics that encourage long, complex sentences. What the writers of these rubrics are thinking I have no clue. Brevity is an invaluable tool. Short sentences are especially important when the content is complex or unfamiliar to the reader; like small steps on a slippery path, they allow the reader to feel in control. Suppose that I am writing about black widow spiders, for example, and I write this:

> Black widows don't really look around for people to bite and in fact they just hang upside down in their webs and so are seldom seen and that is part of their danger because they choose a web site where they will have a good supply of insects, which is where the people usually are, although years ago. . . .

See how tiring this is to read? Fortunately, author Margery Facklam, from whom I borrowed this information, writes much better than this, dividing her text into bite-sized chunks:

> Black widows don't go around looking for someone to bite. They hang upside down in their messy cobwebs, where they are seldom seen, and that is part of their danger. They choose a web site wherever there is a good supply of insects, which is usually where people are, too. Years ago, when most families had outhouses in the backyard instead of indoor bathrooms, black widow bites were more common because the spiders liked living where the fly supply never ran out [2001, p. 15].

We need to teach students the value of manageable sentences. They add clarity. And contrary to the rumors, they challenge the writer. It's hard to hide in a small sentence; you need to *say something*.

2. *No* ands *or* buts. Ask students to write three paragraphs with no *ands* or *buts* or *becauses* at all. This is challenging, perhaps, but quite possible.

3. Listen *for the punctuation.* Sometimes students omit punctuation because they simply do not *hear* it. Start with a punctuation-free piece of writing. Read it aloud, pausing clearly and fully for each comma, semicolon, period, or question mark and using plenty of inflection to accentuate the punctuation. Ask students to fill in the punctuation they hear *as you read:*

> Outside the rain was falling hard and fast it hit the roof like the thunder of an impassioned drummer we lay in our beds listening wondering when it would stop like small birds in a nest we looked up at the ceiling as if expecting the rain to come through it never did of course.

CONVENTIONS

Because problems with conventions are so numerous and varied (and because this issue is covered thoroughly in Chapter 8), I will simply add a few tips for making your teaching of conventions and editing easier.

1. *Create a style sheet.* Publishing houses give authors style sheets, which govern many issues of layout: size and format for headings and titles, models for handling citations, margin sizes, use of graphics or photographs, and other design issues. Your classroom is like your own publishing house. Design a style sheet (see Figure 9.6) that reflects your personal preferences—how you'd like graphics titled, where you want titles placed, how you want the writer's name (or yours) to appear, how many fonts you want to see per page, how you'd like references cited, how you'd like captions for graphics handled, and so on. You may wish to enlarge one copy and post it for students.

2. *Model*, *model*, *model.* Even though students do their own editing, you must show them what is correct, how to spot an error, and how to correct it using appropriate copy editor's symbols. Model often.

3. *Keep your own conventional skills current.* This is harder than it sounds because conventions are ever-changing. Rely on a good handbook and use it frequently. You can keep a whole shelf full of handbooks, but you should designate one as the class authority and refer to it often. Ask students to help you look up the answers to any questions of usage or correctness about which you feel uncertain.

4. *Encourage students to include samples of their editing practice in a portfolio* or writing folder so that they have a visual representation of how their editing skills are growing. This record also gives parents impressive physical evidence of what their students can do.

HELPING CHALLENGED/BEGINNING WRITERS

Many students dread writing. It may be difficult for them, or they think—rightly or wrongly—that they are not very good at it. A lifetime of negative comments only reinforces this internal assessment. The writing-process approach promises help to challenged writers by offering them more time for writing

FIGURE 9.6 *Sample Style Sheet*

1. Please use 12-point Times Roman for basic text.
2. Major headings should be set in 16-point and centered.
3. Sub-heads should be set in 14-point, flush left.
4. All major and sub-heads should be **boldfaced.**
5. All margins should be 1" wide.
6. Please use endnotes, not footnotes.
7. In citing sources, please refer to *Write Source 2000,* pages 231–232.
8. The first paragraph of any text may be block style (flush left). All other paragraphs should be indented 5 spaces.
9. Text should be double-spaced.
10. Bulleted or numbered lists are acceptable.
11. Any illustrations or other graphics should be clearly labeled as Figure 1, Figure 2, and so on, and referenced in the text.
12. At the top right, please put your name, my name, class period, and the date when you turn in the paper. Use the following this format:

    Charles Naka
    Martin
    Period 3
    February 1, 2004

13. A title page is optional. If you prepare a title page (optional), please include the title of the piece, your name, and the date, all centered on the page.
14. Use *italics,* not underlining, to indicate emphasis.
15. Avoid **boldface** except for headings.
16. Avoid FULL CAP'S except when quoting fully capitalized material.
17. Keep exclamation points to a minimum.
18. Contractions are fine.
19. Set quotations of more than 25 words apart from text, single-spaced, and with an extra five spaces to right and left, e.g.,

    > Always write with the reader in mind. Re-read your text, asking yourself whether it makes sense and whether you are having a good time going through the material. If your answer to either one is no, revise! (Marland, 2003, 47)

20. Number pages, after the first page, in the upper right corner.

than many of us used to be given. But time is only useful if you know what to do with it. Students who have no idea how to revise could have years to rework an assignment, and it wouldn't help. Traits can help writers understand what it is writers actually *do* when they revise, and even if they do only *one* thing to revise a given paper, it's a step, one for which they should receive credit. Here are

> *. . . we need to be gentle. Raymond Carver, writer and teacher, was revered by his students. The harshest criticism he would give to a student was: "I think it's good you got that story behind you."*
>
> **—Ralph Fletcher**
> *What a Writer Needs,* 1993, p. 18

> *Other instructors are obsessed with motivating writing. When they share their techniques I am reminded of cattle prods that "motivate" the steer up the ramp towards hamburger land. Good writing is rarely "motivated" from the outside but has to be drawn out of the student.*
>
> **—Donald M. Murray**
> *A Writer Teaches Writing,* 2004, p. 84

some ways to make traits work for writers who find writing difficult or just unappealing:

1. *Focus early conferences on the* writer, *not the writing.* Ask students to share their interests. What are their favorite activities, hobbies, dreams, hopes, worries? Get to know the person first because out of this well comes the writing. How do we motivate writers? The same way we motivate friends: by telling them that we're truly interested in what they have to say.

2. *Keep writing short.* If you're not much of a runner, you probably would rather not sign up for the 26-mile marathon. Fifty yards is plenty. So let students write a little at a time (a paragraph, say) and write *often.*

3. *Do lots of group writing.* Give reluctant or challenged writers partners, and let them write a story together. They will learn from each other as they talk and work. Brainstorming leads or conclusions or best phrasing lets everyone in on the thinking part of writing.

4. *As a class, critique and analyze* anonymous *writing.* Even people who do not like to write themselves or who fear writing enjoy evaluating and discussing the writing of others, and they will learn more from being assessors than you think.

5. *Model writing.* It is much easier to swim, drive a car, ride a horse, or write if you have seen someone do it. Let them see you. You don't have to razzle-dazzle them. Write simply. Write often. Solicit their help. How should you begin? What should you put in? Take out? Get them to problem solve with you as you go. Then you can tell them—honestly—"Look, you're doing it already as you're guiding me. The only difference is *you* need to be the one moving the pencil sometimes."

6. *Give serious time and thought to prewriting.* Many writers stumble because they are pushed into drafting before they are ready. Fear of failure makes them choke—and what we get is limited in length, scope, and feeling. Rehearsing is about exploring and loosening up. Many unsure writers discover that they know more than they thought if they are allowed to use two techniques: talking and drawing. Given time to chat, many students will discover that they are not alone in their apprehension. This is step one. They also discover the value of having a partner in planning how to begin and where to go from there. This is step two. Finally, they have a resource for endless questions, and from questions flows content. This is step three. For some students, sketching adds a whole new dimension; it awakens a creative side of the brain that feeds the writing process. In teacher Penny Clare's classroom (see Chapter 10), students use what they know to make notes, and then they draw. This extra little step in the writing process yields amazing results—and, according to Penny, vocabulary that just would not emerge without the art. See Figure 9.7 for an example.

7. *Encourage dictation.* Many students would write more and with greater confidence (and style) if they could dictate all or part of what they say. Talking feels more natural and more comfortable. Let them write on tape—or talk to you. Make notes on what they say so that you can show them that they had more ideas than they thought; they can then use your notes in their writing:

FIGURE 9.7 *Reilly's Paper*

Day slowly awakens. She lazily opens one eye, pushing royal purples high into the sky, leaving the teals and aquas to linger. A tree stands alone with no one to turn to on a barren landscape. Finally day reaches a warm hand to touch the hard frozen ground.

"Here you told me your hamster died, but then you went right into your shopping trip at K-Mart. How did you feel when your hamster died? Who buried it? Where did you bury it?" These probing questions from teacher Lois Burdett turned a brief sketch of a hamster's last moments into a touching story of loss, in which we see the second grade writer gently touch the body of her now-dead hamster, hoping for a sign of a heartbeat but finding none, and then trying to hold back the tears as Dad descends the stairs to the basement and she breaks the news. Later we see Dad digging a small grave, watch the writer softly place the body inside and say goodbye and then, after pulling up a soft earth blanket, mark the grave with her beloved Hamster's name—and e-mail address (a reminder of our times).

> *We should see our students as smart and capable. We should assume that they can learn what we teach—all of them. We should look through their mistakes or ignorance to the intelligence that lies behind* [emphasis in original].
>
> **—Peter Elbow**
>
> *Embracing Contraries*, 1986, p. 53

8. *Allow a freebie.* Everyone needs a mental health day occasionally, writers included. Struggling students appreciate the notion that they can disregard one assignment of their choice. Most will do this anyway, so why not make a tradition of it?

9. *Build on the positive.* Sometimes it's hard. It may be buried or tough to spot. Look harder. Just one moment of voice or convention used correctly is cause for a small celebration. Think *little victories*. Let the student feel the success. Build confidence before you find fault. And when you comment, don't be gushy, but don't hold back either. No one wants to hear, "Well, your voice is starting to emerge." What is that? A compliment or a complaint? Be enthusiastic: "Your voice grabbed me by the lapels right at this point. I got the chills." The more voice you put in your comments, the more voice you're likely to see in the next paper.

10. *Love it yourself.* Tell your students that *you* love to write. Relish your own small victories. Read your writing aloud for them to hear and celebrate with you.

> *Your unconscious can't work while you are breathing down its neck. You'll sit there going, 'Are you done in there yet, are you done in there yet?' But it is trying to tell you nicely, 'Shut up and go away,' "*
>
> **—Anne Lamott**
>
> *Bird By Bird*, 1995, p. 182

HELPING STUDENTS WHO KNOW THE TRAITS WELL

Maybe your students have worked with the six traits previously and know them well. The last thing you want to hear is, "Oh, no, not 'The Redwoods' again!" Often, I'm asked if there isn't something called *advanced traits*, a term I always find amusing because it sounds as though once we master these basic, simple traits, we can move on to the more sophisticated traits—wit, innuendo, subtlety, profundity, and so on.

Actually, working with the traits is like anything else; it can be as simple or as difficult as you make it. If you wanted to get better at bike riding, you'd ride faster or farther, strap weights to your back, or challenge yourself to take on tougher terrain. You get better at working with the traits pretty much the same way. It is not the *traits* that get more advanced after all, but the *writing*, *thinking*, *reading*, *and discussing*. It's the way in which we *apply* the traits. Here are some suggested strategies for challenging yourself—and your students.

1. *Ask students to score and comment on* your *writing.* Ask them to write essays defending their scores.

2. *Ask them to self-assess their own work* and, again, to write an essay defending that self-assessment. In Ellen's AP English class (see Chapter 10), students assess themselves and write essays defending their assessments. One example is provided by Lauren's writing (see Figure 9.8) and reflections (see Figures 9.9 and 9.10). Notice how self-reflection takes Lauren first inside the world of her own writing—and then into writing in general.

3. *Create your own rubrics.* Rubric development builds thinking skills. It's harder than it might seem, and will make you come face to face with what you think good writing is, regardless of what the six-trait model says. You can specialize: a rubric for persuasive writing, business or tech writing, drama, or poetry. Start with student samples. Read and rank them: high, developing, beginning. Record what you find, and use the results to create a rubric or checklist written in your own words. (See Appendix 3 for copies of rubrics

FIGURE 9.8 *Lauren's Paper, "What Confuses Me"*

What Confuses Me
By Lauren Rothrock

Last night I watched a starving child cry.

I could see the sharp outline of his bones jutting out from beneath his taut skin—his rib cage heaving visibly as the sobs shook his poor, fragile body. I saw his swollen belly and the way his limbs hung limply at his sides, like broken twigs. But what stayed with me were his eyes. Sunken and shadowed in their sockets, his tears seeming to glitter from the depths of some profound emotion that I could not seem to grasp or understand. I watched as they carved shiny, silver traces through the dust on his cheeks, and for a brief moment I wondered whether he could really see me.

Seconds later he was gone—replaced by the image of a dancing Coca-Cola can as the news broadcast switched over to a commercial. And I sat there, mulling over his predicament while wondering whether or not to start my Calculus homework. To me, he was nothing more than a poster child, and I had homework to do.

You ask me what confuses me in life. I'll tell you. I'm confused by the fact that I sleep in a two-story, four-bedroom house while an African family of twelve huddles in a dilapidated old shack made of sticks and mud. I'm confused by the fact that I'm five pounds overweight whereas others haven't seen a bite of food in over a week. I'm confused by the fact that the bracelet I wear around my wrist could support a child for over a month. I'm confused by the fact that I watched that helpless little boy cry—and didn't shed a tear.

I wonder when I changed, when I became so devoid of human emotion that I could look misery in the eye and merely shrug my shoulders. Tough break, kid! Life's rough. When I think about it, I frighten myself. It seems as though there's a side of me that I didn't even know existed—one that has become so numb to the tragedies of this world that it no longer feels the tug of simple human kindness. I can rant and rave about the injustices of this world until I'm blue in the face . . . I can spout out Bible verses about love and charity until my voice turns hoarse . . . But the fact remains the same: I didn't cry. That confuses me.

That night as I lay in bed, the boy's image flashed before me again in my mind. And suddenly it occurred to me: he has a name. In that single, swift instant, something inside of me seemed to give way. He was a real person, flesh and blood—living under the same sky, sleeping under the same moon. It's hard to force yourself to see something you are so willing to ignore. It's easier to spare yourself the pain than embrace the truth. But at that moment I knew that I was helpless to change the reality before me. That boy had gone to bed hungry.

But he no longer cries alone.

based on the six-trait writing rubric. One is a rubric on public speaking developed by Millard Public Schools and the other a rubric for rating video production.)

4. *Compare traits across modes of writing.* As your students write for various purposes, talk about how voice changes (informational to descriptive

FIGURE 9.9 *Lauren's Reflections on "What Confuses Me"*

I have to admit, this essay was very difficult for me to write. At first, I was temped to choose another topic and spare myself the grief rather than dredge up emotions I didn't want to face. But because the subject is so personal to me, I felt that I was able to express myself effectively through my voice (score of 5 on 5-point scale).

By using the example of the African boy, I sought to draw the reader in and give the essay more impact. It is through this experience that I explain my confusion with the world and my apathy towards it. I thought the organization (4) was good—by returning to the boy in the concluding paragraph, I tried to leave the reader with something to think about.

The ideas and content (4) may be a little sketchy—when writing on a subject like "confusion," it's hard to convey your ideas without sounding confused yourself. I had a hard time expanding on my central theme; it was as if I got to a certain point and had nothing more to say. I felt that if I wrote any more, I would just be generating a lot of filler to take up more space, so I went ahead and ended it. This may actually have been to my advantage; sometimes, shorter is better.

I admit that my word choice (4) may have been less than exemplary, but I was trying to avoid a "*sch*olarly" tone and keep it on a more personal level. I tried to make up for the basic word choice by constructing powerful imagery when describing the boy. Reading over it, I wonder whether I may have unintentionally used too many clichés. I guess that's for the reader to decide.

As for sentence fluency (4), I noticed that I like to use a lot of parallel structure. Though that may be good in some cases, there is something called "too much of a good thing." I think that in the future I should experiment a little more with how I construct my sentences. One thing I did like is the way I placed the opening and closing sentences by themselves. I think that some phrases belong alone, without the distraction of a surrounding paragraph.

Overall, I am satisfied with the essay, because I think I was able to get my point across in a powerful way. Besides just answering a question, it gave me the chance to learn something about myself. (Conventions, 5. Our scores were all 5s. Lauren is modest.)

I know no greater time-saver than helping students evaluate their own work . . . I need to help them acquire the skill to be able to reread their own work critically, but I do so with the certain knowledge that rereading will result in better work.

—Donald H. Graves
Testing Is Not Teaching, 2002, p. 77

to narrative) or how even conventions differ in creative versus business or technical writing. When you bring modes (forms, purposes) of writing into the picture, you open up a whole new world of ways to apply and think about traits. They change in subtle but important ways as the purpose of the writing shifts. You can create checklists to define these shifts (see Chapter 11 for samples). As an alternative, create checklists for a children's picturebook, textbook, dictionary or other reference book, job application letter, film script, play, poem, résumé, or any type of writing that is important to your students.

5. *Invite students to keep portfolios.* Within those portfolios, they can show samples of writing that reflect quality performance on each of the six traits—plus growing editing skill to demonstrate proficiency in conventions.

FIGURE 9.10 *Lauren's Reflections on Herself as a Writer*

To me a piece of writing is like a photograph. Be it in color or black and white, it can capture a single moment and hold it forever. In my experiences as a writer, I have often found that I am not content until I have "frozen" such moments on paper, a need that leaves me scribbling notes on everything from gum wrappers to the back of a shopping receipt. As can be seen by the pile of wrappers on my desk, most of my writing never reaches an audience. But for some reason, that doesn't seem to matter. Writing is the only outlet through which I can express myself honestly and without inhibitions.

Whether or not my desire to become a novelist will pan out remains to be seen. I may never see my name grace the spine of a New York Times best seller—in fact, I may never even see my name in print. But that's only the frame on the photograph. I'll never stop taking pictures.

6. *Assess and discuss more challenging pieces using the traits.* Look at conventions or word choice in a legal document, résumé, or job application letter; voice or organization in a play, recipe, board game, a letter of resignation, or set of directions on a box of pancake mix; word choice in a travel brochure, weather forecast, or college manual; fluency in a film review or set of song lyrics; and ideas in a political speech or doctoral dissertation. Assess pieces from Poe, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Melville, Norman Mailer, Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Tim O'Brien, Maya Angelou, Pablo Picasso, Thomas Jefferson, Nelson Mandela, Abe Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, or Franklin Roosevelt. Hold a contest: Who can think up the most challenging assessment? The most unusual? The most riveting? Stretch. Grow. There is always a more difficult assessment task ahead.

7. *Ask students to design their own lessons for teaching traits.* You may wish to assign one trait to each of several groups in your class. Let them use student writing samples, other writing samples, pieces from literature, or activities to enrich the lesson. They should feel free to be inventive! Once they've designed lessons for their own classmates (this is just the warm-up), have them do lessons for

- ✔ Younger children
- ✔ Parents
- ✔ Members of the business community
- ✔ Content area teachers

8. *Conduct your own classroom research.* How do the six traits influence your students' performance—or that of students in another class? Set up an investigation using observation, interviews, and possibly a pre- and postwriting exercise. Document what you learn. Publish the results.

9. *Finally, personify the traits and portray them theatrically.* How does Voice dress and speak? Is Conventions really the stuffed shirt that everyone says he (or she) is? What if Fluency crashed the party? Would she (or he) be attracted to the debonair Word Choice—or find him hopelessly dull? You can ask students to select a part and act out a short play—or just a dialogue. Be prepared to let your real attitudes about the traits show! Read Figure 9.11 to see two writers' personifications of the traits.

And remember. . . . In the end, it isn't the *traits* that become advanced, but our understanding of what makes *writing* work.

FIGURE 9.11 *Personification of the Traits*

Twins

Siamese twins, Conventions and Voice found the search for individuality daunting. Though each had competitive characteristics, their personalities complemented each other as well. Voice's emotional, spontaneous charisma was balanced by Convention's practical, empowering authority. As much as Voice attempted to inspire enthusiasm, Convention's proper organization kept them in balance—and always had the final say. Over the years, the twins discovered what they had, in their hearts, known all along: They needed each other to survive.

Friends

Voice likes clothes that flow, clothes of natural fabric. She never combs her hair or shaves her legs or apologizes for drop-in appearances. Ideas considers Voice her best friend, and hates going anywhere without her. For some reason, Ideas cannot quite get up her courage when Voice isn't around, and shies away from daring stunts like bungee jumping or hang gliding. Conventions is secretly in love with Voice, and is forever giving her small gifts like dashes or whole bouquets of italics. Who knows whether she notices? Her infectious laugh keeps Conventions coming back, though!

CHAPTER 9 IN A NUTSHELL

- Even when you work with traits and give students time for writing, they may continue to experience some roadblocks to success. Be persistent—or just come at a trait from a slightly different perspective.
- To strengthen ideas, voice—and all traits—ensure that students sometimes have the option of writing on personally important topics.
- Use literature you love to provide models for all the traits "in action." When you read, use all the inflection and expression you can muster.
- Continue to encourage students to read everything they write aloud. It will help them to develop an ear for detail, fluency, and voice and also will help them to catch small problems with conventions that the eye can overlook.

- Encourage prewriting/rehearsing. This part of the writing process must not be rushed, for it prepares students to write with comfort and confidence.
- Consider the power of talking and drawing for students who find rehearsal strategies such as webbing, listing, or preliminary drafting too challenging.
- Model the solution of various writers' problems. Your students will learn from helping you.
- Encourage challenged writers to use strategies such as talking, working with a partner, asking (and answering) questions, and dictation to achieve success.
- Take students who know the traits very well to new levels by asking them to assess more difficult pieces, assess and write in various genres, create their own genre-specific rubrics, design their own lessons, or keep portfolios with selected pieces showing strengths in various traits.
- Remember that ultimately it is not the traits themselves that are *advanced* but our understanding of how writing and writing process work.

EXTENSIONS

1. Do you keep portfolios in your classroom? If so, how might students use their knowledge of the six traits in selecting pieces to include? Write down some thoughts and/or share ideas with colleagues.
2. What are some strategies you have found to be effective in working with students who are experienced writers and/or who know the six traits well? With colleagues' help, make a list.
3. What strategies have you found to be effective in helping challenged writers to find success? Again, make a list.
4. Find an unusual piece of writing to assess—something others might not think of in connection with writing assessment (e.g., song lyrics). Bring it in for your study group or class to assess. Talk about the traits that are most important.
5. Look at any single trait—ideas, organization, voice, whatever—across several modes of writing, say, business writing, narrative writing, and persuasive writing. Talk about the changes you see. How might this affect your assessment of your own students' writing?
6. Create a modeling lesson based on a problem you believe struggling writers often face. Present it to students or colleagues.
7. In your class or group, personify and create a dramatic encounter among the six traits. What do you learn from this experience about your attitude toward the various traits? Do you like some more than others? Find some more important than others? Perform your written pieces as a play.

WHY I WRITE

I write when the day is gloomy and boring. I grab a pencil and a pure white piece of paper. The light bulb is bright and going strong. I look outside and everything is clear. I can write. It's possible.

—Jovana Stewart, student writer

LOOKING AHEAD

In Chapter 10 we'll hear the voices of nine teachers who have successfully made six-trait writing part of their process-based curriculum.