

PROMOTING THE SIX-TRAIT MODEL OF WRITING INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT AS AN IMPROVEMENT TO THE WRITING PROCESS IN JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Writing is a communication skill which remains the fulcrum of scholarship. However, despite the various models of writing available to second language teachers and students over the past decades, the ability to write with a high degree of proficiency remains a challenge. One of the methods of writing – Process writing – gained wide acceptance as an effective composing process. Much later, still not being satisfied with the quality of students' writing, teachers of the North Western Education Board in America, refined the method creating an analytical model in order to further improve writing instruction and evaluation at all levels. This paper is making a case towards encouraging Nigerian essay writing teachers to rethink the writing process in terms of the Six-Trait Model for Writing Instruction and Assessment for use at the junior secondary level. By providing an in depth explanation of how the model works, especially with its emphasis on sentence fluency and writing conventions, the paper suggests that the additional information and teaching strategies provided by the model may be a better solution to the writing needs of students in Nigerian schools.

Keywords: Process writing, Six-write traits, writing instruction, writing assessment, Nigeria.

Introduction

One of the goals of the writing teacher is to identify an effective method of instruction that enables his students to produce a piece of writing that exhibits a high degree of communicative competence. A search for this method remains inevitable as can be seen in the various evolutionary teaching writing strategies throughout the years. Writing instruction has moved from the study of model texts and writing sentences that are grammatically correct to writing that requires the development of an efficient and effective composing process (Silva & Matsuda, p.261). Thus process writing introduced a new set of dynamics with an emphasis on the writer following several instructional steps in order to produce an acceptable piece of writing (Richards, 2002). The Six-Trait Model for Writing Instruction and Assessment created by teachers in America to improve the communicative competence of student writing is a further effort to enable students to assimilate the writing process.

In our Nigerian secondary schools, the teaching of writing still poses a problem for teachers who grapple with paucity of ideas, an inadequate vocabulary, poor sentence structure, paragraphs which display lack of coherence and faulty writing conventions among other issues in their students' essays. In addition, according to Okotie (2010) the teachers themselves also have problems with methodology. In view of these persistent challenges, this paper seeks

to examine the features of the Six-Trait Writing Model which might suggest its potential as a method of teaching writing to enable ESL students at JSS level to write better essays.

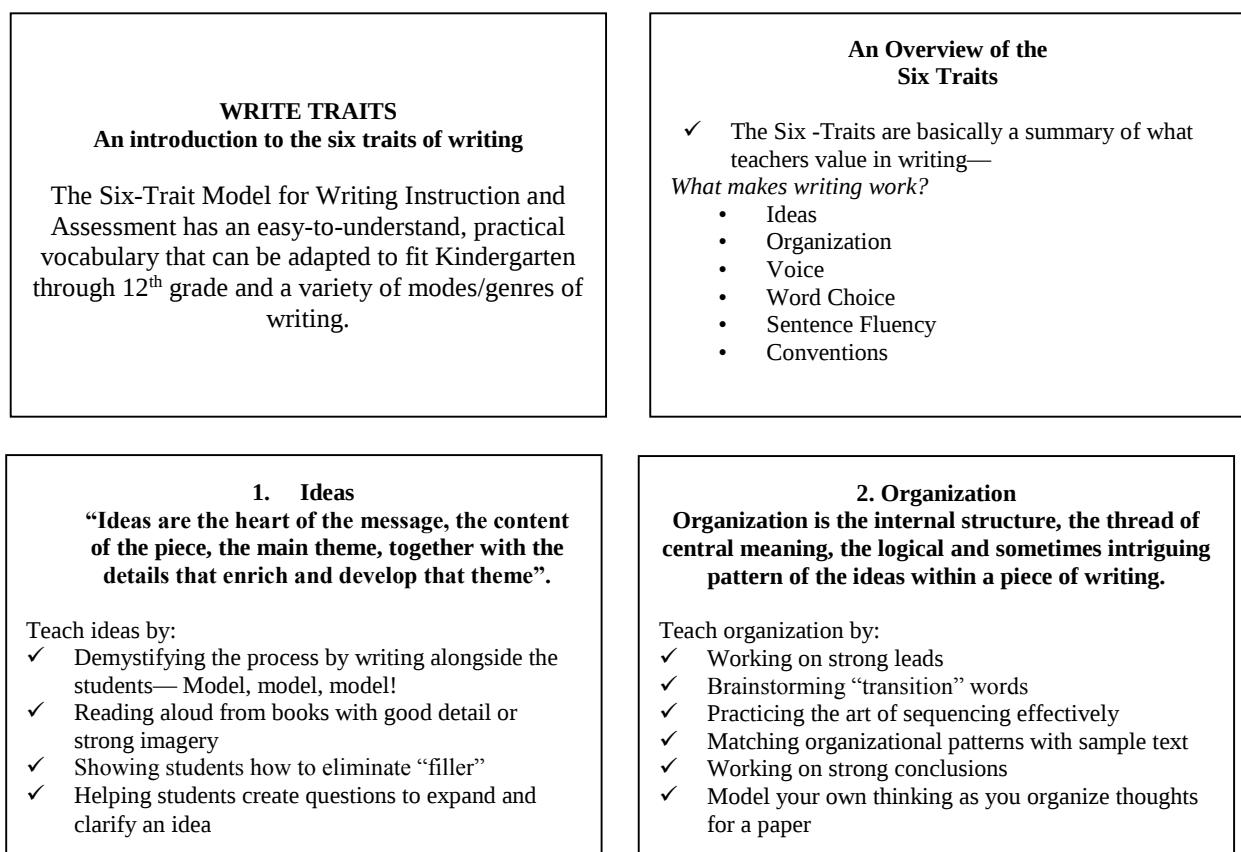
The Six-Trait Model of Writing Instruction and Assessment

The history of the model

The model was created in the late 80's, by teachers in America from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory who saw the need for a resource from which both teachers and students could acquire more accurate feedback and instruction in student writing. The framework of the model was developed from the teachers' decision to select the good qualities of writing and single them out as evaluative markers. This led to the Six- Traits being created for both instruction and evaluation. The model has become popular in many parts of the world as it gives clear guidelines how writing should be carried out in different stages along with rubrics for both qualitative and quantitative assessment.

What does the Six- Traits model look like?

The following is a graphic representation of the six-write traits model



3. Voice- Voice is the heart and soul, the magic, the wit, along with the feeling and conviction of the individual writer coming out through the words Teach voice by: ✓ Reading aloud from voice-filled text ✓ Researching a topic prior to writing– knowledge creates a confident voice ✓ Choosing topics about which the writer feels enthusiastic ✓ Identifying key questions that help bring topics to life ✓ Model	4. Word Choice Word choice is the use of rich, colorful, precise language that moves and enlightens the reader. Teach word choice by: ✓ Working with words within the context of meaning ✓ Encouraging precise language ✓ Sharpening writing with active verbs, precise nouns, and accurate modifiers ✓ Reading aloud to students so they can appreciate the language. ✓ Model
5. Sentence Fluency Sentence fluency is the rhythm and flow of the language, the sound of word patterns, the way in which the writing plays to the ear – not just to the eye. Teach Sentence Fluency by: ✓ Reading aloud pieces of literature that “play to the ear” ✓ Having students block their sentences to check for variety in length. ✓ Encouraging variety in beginnings and lengths of sentences ✓ Pairing short, choppy sentences with longer sentences ✓ Showing models that do not always follow the subject, verb pattern ✓ Model	6. Conventions Conventions are like the mechanical correctness of the piece – spelling, paragraphing, grammar and usage, punctuation, and use of capitals. Teach conventions by: ✓ Teaching copy editor’s symbols and showing students how to use them ✓ Keeping writing tools, such as a good dictionary, grammar handbook, and thesaurus, accessible in the classroom ✓ Reading backwards for spelling errors ✓ Providing numerous opportunities for students to practice editing ✓ Model– Show students how you edit your own writing

Source: *Spencer, C. (2014) <http://player.slideplayer.com/download...>*

Each window describes one of the six traits and is self-explanatory. In the third window, Voice can also be interpreted as the tone of the writing. What makes the write traits unique is that each trait comes with a list of strategies which can be employed to achieve the goal of the particular writing stage. The teacher is can be creative by adding other helpful techniques. In general however, a teacher who uses this model must have adequate materials to explain what is expected. An implicit suggestion of the model is that the teacher who teaches writing should be an effective writing teacher himself.

What is the difference between the writing process and the Six-Traits?

Earlier in this paper it was established that the six-trait writing model was an off-shoot of the writing process in order to make it more answerable to the writing needs of students. In order to explain these differences, the stages of both models will be highlighted to explain such diversions:

1. The Writing Process

This method established the fact that writing was a process and the responsibility of the writer who needed to follow certain steps in order to complete the writing task. These involve: Brainstorming for ideas, organization, writing the first draft, editing the draft, rewriting and finally turning in the product (Ojo, 2018). Danielson (2000), further concurred on the process in the following way.

Prewriting – Getting ideas for the project and outlining ideas with paragraphs.

Drafting – The actual writing begins. Ideas begin to connect into sentences and paragraphs. Unity and coherence must be established in the writing.

Editing – Sharing writing with others. Refining the work, check spellings and grammar

Final drafting – Publishing

The process is highly recursive and steps are interrelated.

2. The Six-Trait Writing Model

The six-trait writing steps follow.

Ideas – Identifying the content of the work, its theme and supporting details

Organization – Creating the internal structure of the writing. Ensure that ideas flow logically.

Voice – Expressing the conviction of the writer. Its forcefulness or otherwise shapes and lifts the writing to a great level.

Word Choice–Using rich language to depict with variety what is being expressed – no ambiguity.

Sentence Fluency – Paying attention to the flow of expression through the accurate application of grammatical rules and sentence construction.

Conventions– Writing conventions include accurate usage of the mechanics of the language, spelling, punctuations, and capitalization (Spencer, 2014).

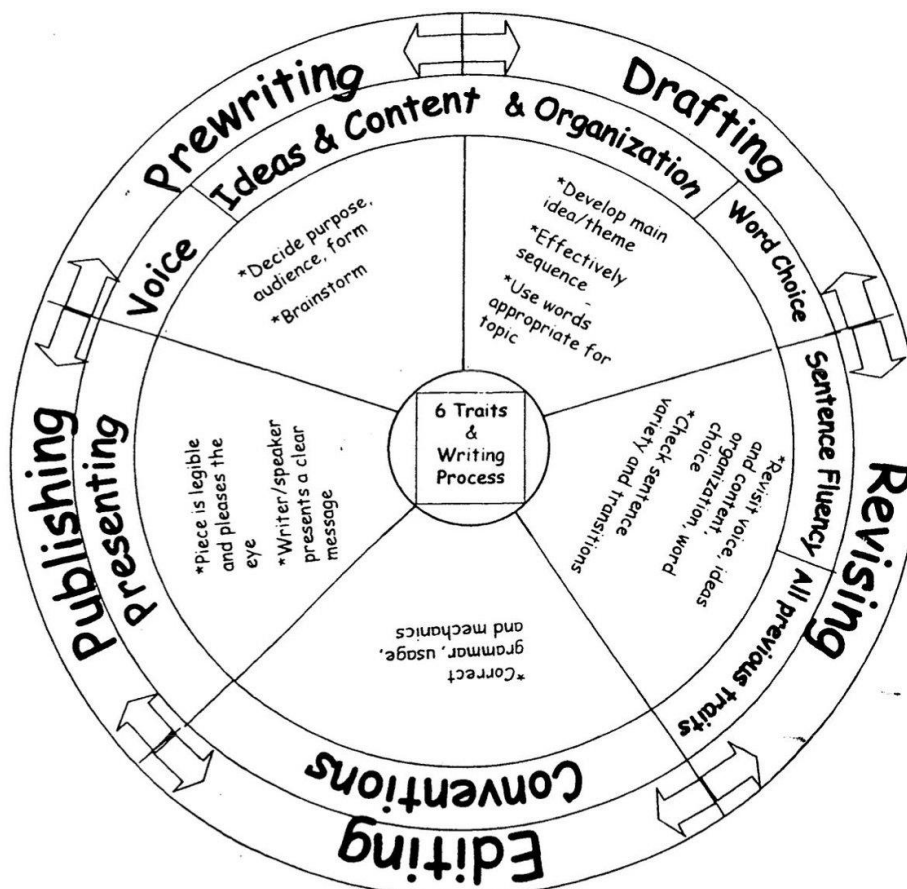
The Differences

The six-trait writing model is much more explicit than the writing process. Whereas the writing process creates the steps to follow to produce an accurate piece of writing, the six-trait write model is made up of traits that are already displayed in good writing.

The writing process is concerned with writing that displays communicative competence. Controversially, such writing can discretely ignore spelling and mechanical errors. We note that this is not the case in the six-traits writing model. Rather than leave it to the editing section (as in the writing process) the model exhibits a sharp departure from the writing process and includes the traits of voice, sentence fluency and writing conventions. Sentence fluency focuses on the rhythm of the language created from of artistry in sentence construction and accurate grammar usage while writing conventions places emphasis on accuracy in spelling, capitalization and punctuation. Voice is a new dimension that is a bit harder to grasp but it involves the attitude of the writer and the audience of the work. Through skilful use of vocabulary the reader can detect the tone of the message.

Unlike the writing process, these six traits are highlighted as being important enough for instruction and assessment. This combination of the write traits resonates in the teaching of ESL students who have serious problems in sentence fluency and writing conventions. Ensuring that this is now included in the writing process is an assurance that student writing can be taken to a higher level of competence.

Connecting the Writing Process and the Six-Trait Writing Model



Source: Heidl-Knoblock, J. & Drake, J. (2005)

<https://pbs.twimg.com/media/DIzd4ECUEAEmsSq.jpg>

The chart explains how the six-trait writing model can fit into the writing process chart. This is done by placing idea, content and voice in under Prewriting activities; organisation and word choice under Drafting; Sentence fluency and all previous traits under Revising; Conventions under Editing and Presentation under Publishing which is the final draft..

The Assessment of the Six-Traits Writing Model

Since assessment was the original driving force behind the six-trait writing model, some explanation will be devoted to its assessment characteristics. Three rubrics(assessment tables) suitable for the use at the junior secondary level have been selected for discussion. It is to be noted that the features of each trait are assessed at each level

WRITING RUBRICS-----Instructions for assessment

Table 1: Rubric for the Six -Traits of Writing No. 1

Criteria	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Ideas • Complexity and relations to topic • Supporting details • Purpose	• uses only a few simple ideas unrelated to the topic • few supporting details • purpose of writing is unclear	• uses simple idea that are sometimes related to the topic • some supporting details • purpose of writing is somewhat clear	• use developed ideas that are mostly related to the topic • uses sufficient supporting details • purpose of writing is clear	• use well-developed ideas that are all connected to the topic • uses many supporting details • purpose of writing is clear and effectively presented
Voice • evidence of writer's voice	• writer's voice is not evident	• writer's voice is emerging	• writer's voice is evident	• writer's voice is strong and distinct
Word Choice • clarity • variety	• limited choice of words; unclear	• adequate choice of words; somewhat clear	• good choice of word; clear	• effective choice of word; precise and very clear
Sentence Fluency • sentence structure, types, length • literary devices	• little attempt to use a variety of sentence structures, types, length and literary devices	• some attempt to use a variety of sentence structures, types, length and literary devices	• good use of a variety of sentence structures, types, length and literary devices	• effective use of a wide variety of sentence structures, types, length and literary devices
Organisation • logical planning • beginning, middle, end • sequencing	• limited evidence of logical planning • little evidence of a beginning, middle and end • limited sequencing	• some evidence of logical planning • some evidence of a beginning, middle and end • some sequencing	• logical planning evidence • has a beginning, middle and end • good sequencing	• logical planning evidence and thorough • has a distinct beginning, middle and end • excellent, effective sequencing
Convention	• frequent errors detract from readability • uses few required conventions • requires extensive editing	• some errors detract from readability • uses some required conventions • requires moderate editing	• few errors that do not detract from readability • uses required conventions • requires minimum editing	• errors-free • uses required conventions with accuracy • requires no editing

Adapted from: Spandel, V. *Seeing with New Eyes*, (1997). V. Portland, or: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

Table 2: Six- Traits Writing Rubric No.2

	6 Exemplary	5 Strong	4 Proficient	3 Developing	2 Emerging	1 Beginning
Idea & Content	• Exceptionally clear, focused, engaging with relevant, strong supporting detail	• Clear, focused, interesting idea with appropriate detail	• Evident main idea with some support which may be general or limited	• Main idea may be cloudy because supporting detail is too general or even off-topic	• Purpose and main idea may be unclear and cluttered by irrelevant detail	• Lacks central idea; development is minimal or non-existent

Organisation	- Effectively organized in logical and creative manner - Creative and engaging intro and conclusion	- Strong order and structure - Inviting intro and satisfying closure	- Organisation is appropriate but conventional - Attempt at introduction and conclusion	- Attempts at organisation, may be a "list" of events - Beginning and ending not developed	- Lack of structure; disorganised and hard to follow - Missing or weak intro and conclusion	- Lack of coherence; confusing - No identifiable introduction or conclusion
Voice	- Expressive, engaging, sincere - Strong sense of audience - Shows emotion: humour, honesty, suspense or life	- Appropriate to audience and purpose - Writer behind the words comes through	- Evident commitment to topic - Inconsistent or dull personality	- Voice may be inappropriate or non-existent - Writing may seem mechanical	- Writing tends to be flat or stiff - Little or no hint of writer behind words	- Writing is lifeless - No hint of the writer
Word Choice	- Precise, carefully chosen - Strong, fresh, vivid images	- Descriptive, broad and purpose - Writer behind the words comes through	- Language is functional and appropriate - Descriptions may be overdone at times	- Words may be correct but mundane - No attempt at deliberate choice	Monotonous often repetitious, sometimes inappropriate	- Limited range of words - Some vocabulary misused
Sentence Fluency	- High degree of craftsmanship - Effective variation in sentence pattern	- Easy flow and rhythm - Good variety in length and structure	- Generally in control - Lack variety in length and structure	- Some awkward constructions - Many similar patterns and beginnings	- Often choppy - Monotonous sentence pattern - Frequent run-on sentences	- Difficult to follow or read aloud - Disjointed, confusing rambling
Conventions	Exceptionally strong control of standard conventions of writing	Strong control of conventions; errors are few and minor	Control of most writing conventions; occasional errors with high risk	Limited control of conventions; frequent errors do not interfere with understanding	Frequent significant errors may impede readability	Numerous errors distract the reader and make the text difficult to read

Source: Schmidt, A. (2013). The Art of the Rubric

Retrieved from <http://coralfrontinn.com/index.php?option...>

Table 3: Six- Traits of Writing Rubric No.3

TRAITS/SCORE	100 – 90	89 – 80	79 – 70	69 – 60
IDEAS	All on topic with excellent detail	Most on topic with good detail	Some really good parts and some aren't there yet	Off topic with fuzzy details
ORGANIZATION	Easy to read, has a snappy look, smooth transitions, and awesome conclusion	Well organised with an interesting look, good transitions and a clear conclusion	Some really smooth parts are included while others need word	No beginning or ending and difficult to read out loud
VOICE	Very individual and is confident and sincere	Writer's personality is evident with some flavour	A lot of telling and not enough showing	No idea of the writer's personality
WORD CHOICE	Excellent use of energetic verbs, colourful words	Used some strong verbs, a sense of trying out new words	Correct but not striking, words aren't specific	Boring word choices with misused words not very descriptive
SENTENCE FLUENCY	Sentences are clear and vary in length, very easy to read aloud	Sentences have varying lengths and are somewhat easy to read aloud	Sentences are usually construction correctly and easy to read aloud	Sentences are choppy difficult to read aloud
CONVENTIONS	Correct spelling, punctuation and capitalisation with paragraphs	Only a few errors with an attempt at paragraphing	Simple things are done well with paragraphing attempt	Many errors with no paragraphing.

Source: Model and Scoring Rubrics (n.d)

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Observation on the rubrics

Using the Six – Traits Writing Model as a tool for teaching essay writing demands that teachers must not only acquaint themselves with the method of assessing the six- traits, but also be skilled writers themselves who can spot the difficulties their students face - in order to train their students to recognize their own mistakes. The essays must be read very carefully before assigning the trait to a particular score .The last rubric has the additional feature of scores being assigned to the traits. Nigerian teachers should adjust these scores accordingly. The section on voice can be left until later on when students have grasped the other sections very well.

Conclusion

Employing mostly graphic representations, this paper was aimed at explaining the Six-Trait writing model for assessment and instruction to ESL teachers with the hope that it would move them from the broad-based writing process to a more dynamic and hindsight approach. Under normal circumstances, using the process approach leaves many ESL writers unable to achieve a high degree of communicative competence because their essays still display severe writing deficiencies that resonate with ESL writers. The Six - Traits Model takes these deficiencies seriously enough to include them as specific areas for attention by including them for direct instruction and assessment. If this model sparks the interest of stakeholders, then workshops could be held to take teachers through the model and rubrics. By adopting the Six-Trait Model as a writing strategy, teachers are likely to raise the level of writing achievement of their junior secondary school students who need to form good writing habits. Getting the process right at this stage, would create a solid foundation for writing at the senior secondary and tertiary levels. Teachers too would not be left out in the benefits of the Six- Traits Model as Spandel (2005) explains:

... when you become familiar with those criteria, you are not only prepared to assess writing with greater skill, ease, and consistency than ever before, but you are also prepared to teach it with a confidence and insight you never thought possible...The traits will fully support, complement, and enhance the best of your own curriculum.(p.ix)

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