Write Traits & the Link to Common Core Standards for Writing

by Vicki Spandel, coauthor of Write Traits

Vicki Spandel is a founding coordinator of the 17-member teacher team that developed the original, nationally recognized 6-trait model for writing assessment and instruction. A specialist in teaching writing and revision to students of all ages, she is the author of *Write Traits, Write Traits Advanced,* and *Write Traits Kindergarten,* as well as *The 9 Rights of Every Writer, Creating Writers,* and *Creating Young Writers.*

Characteristics of Students Who Are College and Career Ready

1. They demonstrate independence.

The **Write Traits** kits are specifically designed to encourage students to become strong independent writers, assessors, and revisers. This goal is repeatedly stated outright, and the whole purpose of teaching students to thoughtfully, intelligently evaluate their own work is to put them in charge of their own writing process.

Common
Core

2. They build strong content knowledge.

We emphasize the importance of knowing one's topic in writing proficiently—and in revising. Continually, students are encouraged to research topics as they revise. Specific texts to support content knowledge are often recommended (see Coach's Corners) in connection with revising informational pieces.

3. They respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline.

The connection here is especially strong. Students are encouraged to think about audience and purpose as part of virtually every writing task, and are also encouraged to write in multiple genres—for different purposes and audiences. A quick review of suggested writing topics following each Literature Connection makes this clear. Students also write for multiple purposes within the focused lessons (short writing).

4. They comprehend as well as critique.

This is a hand-in-glove fit. We continually ask students to read, review, reflect upon, and critique their own writing, the writing of other students, and selections from literature—both those we identify and include and those they discover through their own independent exploration. Nearly every lesson includes passages to review. Writers look for main ideas, supporting details, strong leads or endings, extraneous information, strong verbs, moments of strong voice, sentence variety, and a host of other features.

In addition, writers read and score a minimum of four student selections, two at the start of the unit, two at the end. This does not even include the many opportunities to share short writings with partners or in a writing circle. Sharing and responding is a constant, emphasized element of instruction in the kits.

5. They value evidence.

Again, a perfect fit. We ask writers to use carefully crafted rubrics, checklists, and posters in reviewing and rating their own work or that of others. Students are asked to support their scores with evidence from the writing at hand, citing specific details (or lack thereof), wording, sentence structure, organizational features, conventional strengths and problems, and so on. Further, students are encouraged to use their findings over time in refining rubrics and checklists to even more accurately and fully reflect the performance they see and hear.

6. They use technology and digital media strategically and capably.

Students are encouraged to conduct online research to find support or details that will enrich their own writing or be of use in revising the writing of others. They are also encouraged to use technology in creating and formatting documents—from something as simple as choosing the right font to something more complex, such as putting together a video or PowerPoint® presentation.

7. They come to understand other perspectives and cultures.

We have sought to include literature representing a wide range of perspectives and cultural experiences and traditions. In presenting such literature, teachers are encouraged to explore differences and to allow ample opportunity for students to voice differences in an environment that promotes respect and appreciation for diversity. Suggested writing topics reinforce cultural diversity by urging students to explore topics from many perspectives. In addition, the kits feature recurring suggestions for differentiating instruction to meet the needs of students who differ culturally, physically, psychologically, and in learning style.

K–8 Common Core Standards

STANDARDS 1–3

Text Types and Purposes:
Argument, Informative/Explanatory Texts, Narratives

We believe that students learn to write in diverse genres in two ways: by writing in those genres themselves and by studying what others have done to see what works well and what could be improved. In the kits, we offer opportunities for both.

Students review, discuss, assess (and sometimes revise) a wide range of writing in multiple genres, including persuasive, informational, and narrative texts. In so doing, they have a chance to look for strengths and problems across the six traits of writing (Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, Conventions & Presentation). In addition, each genre is clearly identified to encourage students to consider how well a particular selection meets the criteria that define excellence within that genre.

Finally, students are required to write in multiple genres, both in their lesson-to-lesson short writings and in the longer pieces that are an integral part of instruction for each unit. Teachers are urged to have students write in diverse genres, and—in the best spirit of the writing workshop—to allow each student free choice. That means that the class as a whole will not be working on a report or story or poem, but rather, each member of that class will produce a work in his or her genre of choice. As they interact and share their writing and process, students will automatically coach one another about the skills and strategies required for excellence in a particular genre, and will also provide models for one another's future work.

STANDARDS 4–6

Production and Distribution of Writing: Traits, Writing Process, and Technology

Traits. The six traits of writing clearly form part of the instructional core of the **Write Traits** kits. The core standards call specifically for "organization, development, substance, and style" appropriate for "task, purpose, and audience." As noted already, students write for numerous purposes and perform a wide range of writing tasks. And in so doing, they develop writing that manifests each of the traits called for. **Organization** (in the standards) correlates to the **Write Traits** trait of Organization, **development** to Ideas, **substance** to Ideas, and **style** to Voice, Word Choice, and Sentence Fluency.

Process. The core standards also call for writers to strengthen writing by "planning, revising, editing, or trying a new approach"—in other words, to apply the fundamentals of writing process. Writing process is the other major part of the **Write Traits** kits' instructional core. Throughout the kits, at all levels, students receive direct instruction in planning, prewriting strategies, drafting with focus, revising purposefully, editing with skill and style, and even trying a new approach. Students continually practice revision and editing strategies. By the end of their instruction, they know how to (among other things):

• Choose a personal topic

• Narrow the topic to make it manageable

• Add, expand, or delete details

• Write an inviting lead

• Write an effective ending that wraps up the writing

• Choose an appropriate title

• Strengthen transitional connections

• Match organizational design with purpose

• Adjust voice to purpose

• Adjust voice to audience

• Strengthen voice to reflect the writer's true thoughts and feelings

- Make word choice more precise

- Use strong verbs to energize writing

- Make writing more concise

- Revise run-ons

- Create variety in sentence length and structure

- Use repetition for effect

- Make dialogue sound authentic

- Read silently and aloud to check for errors

- Use copy editor's symbols to mark unedited text

- Use resources to check spelling, grammar, or other conventional issues

- Design a document, using technology, to meet the needs and preferences of readers.

Daily writing. Students write and revise on a daily basis, rehearsing strategies on small pieces, then applying several strategies together to revise and edit longer writing selections. The kits provide a scaffolded approach that helps ensure success: Students practice revision on someone else's text first, then revise their own.

Age-appropriate expectations. As suggested within the standards, students are asked to apply writing process steps appropriate to their age. Thus, primary students prewrite by drawing or talking, while older students may create webs, sensory detail charts, or word webs. Primary students are encouraged to sustain drafting by writing "one more sentence," while older writers are encouraged to write for 20- or 30-minute blocks, and to extend writing over multiple days. Primary writers may revise by adding a single detail—or by writing a whole new draft. Older writers rewrite significant chunks of text—or sometimes take a whole new approach. Editing for a primary writer may be as simple as adding a missing period, while for an older writer it involves carefully proofing and correcting a text through multiple readings. Complexity grows within each trait kit, lesson to lesson, and also across the trait kits as students in Grades 1 through 8 gain skills.

Realistic time parameters. Further success in applying process is ensured by providing an element missing from many writing programs: time. Students have ample time to prewrite and draft. Then they put their work away for a time, creating a mental distance that heightens objectivity, but also allowing time to practice and strengthen their revision and editing skills. When they return to their drafts, they are much better prepared to revise and edit with purpose—and the difference between rough and revised copy (on which the teacher bases assessment) will show that. Further, because the trait of Conventions & Presentation is part of *every single unit*—instead of being set apart, as in most trait-based approaches to writing instruction—students are building revision *and* editing skills *throughout their course of instruction*, not just at the end of the line. Everyone pays homage to the importance of teaching conventions in context, but the kits make it happen. We show how Conventions & Presentation connect to Ideas, Organization, Voice—every trait.

"Trying a new approach." In fact, we do teach "trying a new approach," starting over with a new beginning, new genre, new perspective, as one form of revision. Few (if any) other writing guides do this. We want students to understand that when information is severely limited or when a different organizational design, perspective, or voice provides a better option, starting over is a valid and effective form of revision. Teachers do not direct this decision, however; students will make the decision on their own based on their personal and careful assessment of a writing sample.

Shared research and writing projects. Collaboration is an essential hallmark of instruction within the *Write Traits* kits. Students continually work with, coach, and confer with partners or members of a writing circle. They review literature together, respond to one another's writing, plan collaborative writing, and even assign roles within the group to make production and publication efficient.

Technology. Using technology to produce, publish, and interact with others about writing is encouraged throughout the kits. We ask teachers to make use of Smartboards, document projectors, cameras, and computers in helping students to create publications in a wide range of genres, from podcasts to webinars or slideshows. What's more, *every lesson at every grade level* closes with a featured section, "Extending the Lesson," that offers one or more ideas for using technology to help students build or strengthen skills.

In Grades 6 through 8, students also have opportunities to do a final major group project in which they make all decisions—choosing a topic, assigning roles within the group (researcher, lead writer, editor, document designer, technology advisor, artist), and determining final genre and design. Results of this project are advertised and presented to a selected audience.

The **Write Traits** kits also take a revolutionary, wholly new approach to the presentation component of Conventions & Presentation. Too often, presentation is taught essentially as "neatness," with focus on handwriting and margins. But this approach is outdated with more and more students composing, revising, editing, and designing via computer. Thus, within the scope of the kits, students are asked to read and respond to a wide range of computer-generated documents: invitations, menus, book covers, author biographies, instructional pamphlets, advertisements, playbills, scripts, passages from textbooks and picture books, tables of contents, posters, concrete poetry, and *much* more. Further, they are given opportunities to plan, draft, and design parallel documents of their own, using whatever technological resources are available to them.

Writing quality and assessment. Unlike many lesson sets, the *Write Traits* kits have provisions for quality assessment built in. We offer carefully crafted and revised rubrics to span performance across all six traits: Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, and Conventions & Presentation. Further, such rubrics are age-appropriate, with one set for primary writers, one for upper elementary, and yet another for secondary students. For each trait, we provide both a teacher and a student rubric, encouraging students to not only assess the writing of others, but continually assess their own work for purposes of planning revision. Rubrics are supported by trait posters (one for each trait) and age-appropriate checklists, handy for reviewing everyday writing.

Reading-writing connection. We support the reading-writing connection in many ways. First, we continually provide passages from literature that illustrate writing strengths, encouraging students to read like writers, looking for what others do well. As noted earlier, we encourage students to identify their own literary mentors, as well. Throughout the kits, one of the primary strategies emphasized in connection with revision is reading one's own writing, both silently and aloud—and reading it from the perspective of a reader who might come to it cold. Does it make sense? Does the wording work? Is the voice right? Thinking like a reader is, we believe, one of the primary strategies in revising well. Finally, our trait posters have a unique design. Instead of simply telling students four things to do in connection with each trait, we ask them to think about the reasons behind each decision a writer makes, filling in the impact on the reader. For example, a writer "makes everything clear, beginning to end." Why? So the reader "understands the message." The writer "chooses details with care." Why? So the reader "pays attention and learns something new." By thinking through these connections, young writers develop a deeper understanding of the reading-writing connection than they ever could simply by skimming over an already complete poster.

STANDARDS 7–9
Research to Build and Present Knowledge: Short Focused Projects, Gathering Information, Writing in Response to Literary Sources

Short writing versus extended projects—and information gathering. Opportunities for "quick writes" and extended writing are routinely alternated, and students have extensive opportunity for both. Throughout the kits, writers complete four focused lessons to build skills in each trait—as well as an additional fifth lesson linking Conventions & Presentation to that particular trait (5 lessons per unit, 25 major trait-based lessons per kit, or 50 focused lessons if they are split over two days, as recommended). Students also complete 4 additional lessons (per kit) relating to the assessment and revision

of writing samples other than their own. Many of these shorter lessons require research in order to ensure that details are accurate, main ideas are supported, language is precise, conventions are correct, and so forth.

In addition, students are encouraged to do extensive reading and research in conjunction with the writing and revision of their own work—and this draft is planned, written, revised, and edited over a period of weeks. During that time, students are encouraged to do any research necessary to support their own drafting and revision. To do so, they must identify sources of information, including online sources; validate authenticity; collect information and screen it for what is most interesting, new, and accurate; incorporate research into their work; and cite sources. Specific editorial practice in designing and editing source lists is provided within the kits for older writers.

Specific sources recommended. Two other things are important to note in connection with research. First, as noted earlier, we recommend numerous specific resources useful in revising content-specific writing by writers other than the student. Many such pieces are **informational**, and revising them demands knowledge of the topic. "Coach's Corners" often contain titles that teachers and writers themselves will find useful.

Revision and research, primary level. Second, we recognize that for very young writers, first and second graders especially, revision needs to look a little different. Such writers are led through guided revision in which the teacher may do some of the actual writing but students do virtually all of the thinking, planning, and decision making. Research is part of guided revision, but teachers may assist in identifying useful sources and may share them aloud with the class, then lead discussions about what writers have learned—and help writers make a bridge from research to revision. (Note: Teachers have the option to let young writers do their own revision, individually or with a partner, or to do a whole class guided revision in which writers offer suggestions as the teacher models revision. This offers teachers flexibility to modify instruction to meet students' needs while ensuring that even the

very youngest writers participate in the whole writing process from planning through revision and document design.)

Response to literature. Writing in response to literary or informational sources is an integral part of every kit. The "Literature Connection" has several purposes. First, it shows a trait "in action," helping writers understand how professional writers make ideas clear, organize details, use voice to move readers, and so on. Second, it provides inspiration for writing. Students are not required to write in direct response to the literature shared, but are certainly invited to do so. The list of suggested multi-genre topics ALL connect (in diverse and wide-ranging ways) to that literature—its subject matter, voice, presentation, style, or cultural source.

The "Literature Connection" offers two other important features. The first is alternate selections (listed under "Other Books You'll Love"). The second is a guided tour of each featured selection. Specific passages for reading aloud are recommended (unless the teacher shares the whole text), and we list suggested activities and questions to enrich the experience and help students gain maximum understanding of the text.

Personal selection. Every effort has been made to include samples from some of the finest literature available. At the same time, however, we want students to exercise choice, too. Numerous opportunities are provided for students to identify their own mentor texts and to share them with others in the class. This offers students a chance to connect writing skills to literature by looking for samples that exemplify particularly strong writing, and also gives them a chance to serve as teachers and coaches within their writing circles or for the class as a whole.

Range of Writing: Writing Routinely Over Extended Time Frames and Shorter Time Frames

Traits: Connected to process and writing workshop. The *Write Traits* kits are designed to help students flourish within a writing workshop environment of which writing process is an integral part. The whole purpose of the kits is to show that the traits do not stand alone, as is often supposed, but work in conjunction with writing process to help students develop strong skills in all steps of process—but most notably in revision and editing.

Daily short writing. With that purpose in mind, students are provided with opportunities to write daily, and most of that ongoing writing is very short—a paragraph or less (a few sentences for primary writers). This promotes frequent reflection and sharing, but also ensures that writers can practice many, many different kinds of skills in preparation for writing more extended, complex pieces. The idea is that students will receive virtually continuous feedback on small, manageable writing efforts which are *not*, however, formally assessed.

Longer writing. The writing students do following the "Literature Connection" is intended to be longer and more complex, and is also intended to be formally assessed. Teachers use a six-trait rubric for this, and compare rough drafts with finals, determining the effectiveness of each writer's revision. Students produce five such extended pieces within each kit.

Lesson extensions. It should be noted that numerous other writing ideas are suggested under "Extending the Lesson," a feature that follows each of the five lessons within a given unit. Were a teacher to pursue *all* of these, it would add significantly to the lesson as a whole, as well as provide additional opportunities for short writing. Extensions, as noted earlier, also expand opportunities to use technology.

English Language Arts Conventions

Progressive Skills
In addition to all of the connections with writing standards just noted, the **Write Traits** kits provide direct instruction relating to each of the following English Language Arts Conventions:

1c: Ensuring subject-verb agreement (Conventions & Presentation)

3a: Choosing words for effect (Word Choice)

1c: Producing complete sentences, avoiding rhetorically poor run-ons or fragments (Sentence Fluency)

1d: Correctly using frequently confused words (to, too, two) (Conventions & Presentation)

3a: Using punctuation for effect (Conventions & Presentation)

3b: Maintaining consistency in style and tone (Voice)

3c: Choosing words and phrases to convey ideas precisely (Word Choice)

2a: Using punctuation to separate items in a series (Conventions & Presentation)

3a: Expanding, combining, and reducing sentences for meaning, reader interest, and style (Sentence Fluency)

2a: Using commas, parentheses, or dashes to set off nonrestrictive parenthetical elements (Conventions & Presentation)

3a: Varying sentence patterns for meaning, reader interest, and style (Sentence Fluency)

3b: Choosing words and phrases that express ideas concisely, eliminating wordiness and redundancy (Word Choice)

Final Thoughts

It may also be helpful to realize the depth and breadth of writing instruction provided in each of the **Write Traits** kits. To help make this clear, note the following lesson breakdown per kit:

Lesson Focus	Number of Lessons
Trait of Ideas	4 x 2 days per lesson = 8
Conventions & Presentation connected to the trait of Ideas	1 x 2 days per lesson = 2
Trait of Organization	4 x 2 days per lesson = 8
Conventions & Presentation connected to the trait of Organization	1 x 2 days per lesson = 2
Trait of Voice	4 x 2 days per lesson = 8
Conventions & Presentation connected to the trait of Voice	1 x 2 days per lesson = 2
Trait of Word Choice	4 x 2 days per lesson = 8
Conventions & Presentation connected to the trait of Word Choice	1 x 2 days per lesson = 2
Trait of Sentence Fluency	4 x 2 days per lesson = 8
Conventions & Presentation connected to the trait of Sentence Fluency	1 x 2 days per lesson = 2
Introductory Papers: Discussion & Assessment	1
Introductory Papers: Revision Practice	1
Literature Connection: Discussion	1
Literature Connection: Writing a Personal Draft	1
Concluding Papers: Discussion & Assessment	1
Concluding Papers: Revision Practice	1
Revision of Personal Writing	1
Total basic instructional lessons per kit	**57**

*Note that this total does not include any extension lessons (of which there are many) or any extra days spent on the Literature Connection or the drafting or revision of a personal draft.

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