

# Institute for Excellence in Writing

## Structure & Style: Support for the Six Traits Assessment

*Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory  
Six-Trait Analytical Writing Assessment Model*

### Scoring Guide (Rubric) for the Six Traits:

Compositions are evaluated with a score of 1-5 on each of these criteria for a possible 30 points.

- I. Ideas and Content
- II. Organization
- III. Voice
- IV. Word Choice
- V. Sentence Fluency
- VI. Conventions

### I. Ideas and Content (Development)

#### **Score of “5” indicates:**

This paper is clear and focused. It holds the reader's attention. Relevant anecdotes and details enrich the central theme or storyline.

- Ideas are fresh and original.
- The student writes from knowledge or experience and shows insight, an understanding of life, and a knack for picking out significant ideas.
- Relevant, quality details give the reader important information that goes beyond the obvious or predictable.
- The writer develops the topic in an enlightening, purposeful way that makes a point or tells a story.
- Every piece adds something to the whole.

#### **Score of “3” indicates:**

- The writer begins to define the topic, though development is still basic or general.
- The writer's direction is visible but the reader needs more information to “fill in the blanks.”
- The writer draws on knowledge or experience but has difficulty going from generalities to specifics.
- Ideas are reasonably clear, though they may not be detailed, personalized, or expanded enough to show in-depth understanding or a strong sense of purpose.
- The writer attempts support but doesn't go far enough yet in fleshing out the main point or storyline.
- Details often blend the original with the predictable.

*Teaching Writing: Structure & Style  
Syllabus Analysis and Application*

### Structural Units:

1. Notetaking & Outlines
2. Summarizing from Notes
3. Summarizing Narrative Stories
4. Summarizing a Reference
5. Writing from Pictures
6. Using Multiple References
7. Creative Writing (writing from own brain)
8. Formal Essay
9. Critique

### Stylistic Techniques:

- I. “Dress-up” (“ly” word, who/which, strong verb, quality adjective, adverbial clause)
- II. Sentence Openers (subject, prepositional, “ly”, “ing”, clausal, VSS)
- III. Decorations (question, conversation, 3sss, dramatic [VSS], opening/closing, simile/metaphor, alliteration)
- IV. Triple Extensions

### I. Ideas and Content (Development)

Many writing approaches are based on the notion that children's brains are filled with “original” thoughts and that they should have a desire or ability to write these insights down on paper. However, a careful observation of children completely contradicts these ideas. Most children who do write easily will first use facts they have read or been taught; very few can objectively view or describe their opinions or experience.

Writing requires the accurate articulation of formal language patterns, which are acquired mostly through reading, being read to, or spending time in more formal conversation. The ease with which a child can produce “original” content will be directly proportional to his or her language-based perceptions of that information or experience. Consequently, although a child may have had a powerful experience, unless he has an opportunity to translate that experience into a formal language pattern, writing about it will be, as for most children, a difficult if not impossible task. This is why teachers frequently have difficulties using “journals” successfully.

**Score of “1” indicates:**

As yet, the paper has no clear sense of purpose or central theme. To extract meaning from the text, the reader makes inferences based on sketchy details. The writing reflects any of these problems:

- The writer still needs a topic or hasn't defined the topic in a meaningful, personal way.
- Information is very limited or unclear.
- The text may be repetitious or may read like a collection of disconnected, random thoughts.
- Everything seems as important as everything else; the reader has a hard time sifting out what's critical.

**II. Organization****Score of “5” indicates:**

The organization enhances and showcases the central idea or storyline. The order, structure, and presentation of information compels and moves the reader through the text.

- Details fit where they're placed; sequencing is logical and effective.
- An inviting introduction draws the reader in; a satisfying conclusion leaves the reader with a sense of resolution.
- Pacing is well controlled; the writer knows when to slow down and elaborate and when to pick up the pace and move on.
- Thoughtful transitions clearly show how ideas connect. Organization flows so smoothly the reader hardly thinks about it.

**Score of “3” indicates:**

A strong organizational structure moves the reader through the text without undue confusion. However, the paper may still exhibit any of the following problems:

- Though recognizable, the introduction may not create a strong sense of anticipation, and the conclusion may not tie up all loose ends.
- Sequencing is usually logical, but may be so predictable in places that the structure takes attention away from the content.
- Pacing is fairly well controlled, though the writer sometimes spurts ahead too quickly or spends too much time on unimportant details.
- Transitions often work well; at other times, connections between ideas are fuzzy.
- The organization sometimes supports the main point or storyline; at other times, the reader feels an urge to slip in a transition or move things around.

Those children who can, without much assistance, easily create content that is “clear, focused, anecdotal, insightful and purposeful” (criteria from the 6 Traits) almost always use ideas and information that they have read recently, read a lot about because of a strong interest, or have written about previously.

Therefore, in equipping children to produce content in their writing, the three most essential activities are:

- Reading—especially non-fiction
- Formal discussion or narration of content learned in history, science, geography, etc.
- Frequent practice in writing with meaningful content provided.

Units 1-4, 6 and 8 of the Structure & Style syllabus require frequent writing from source texts—both fiction and non-fiction—as a part of cross-subject study. This effectively gives the child experience with information and ideas focused through the formal language patterns, which will be helpful for independently writing with good ideas and strong development.

**II. Organization**

The organization of writing, either fiction or non-fiction, primarily depends upon planning a sequence for the presentation of facts or ideas. Students must consider two basic areas of organization: overall composition and individual paragraph.

**Fiction Compositions**

Having a model and planning with an outline are absolutely vital. All stories must have three basic components. This “story sequence” is seen in any story writing regardless of length.

1. Establish the characters and setting (mood).
2. Introduce a problem (want or need) to develop a plot and engage the reader.
3. Ultimately, resolve the problem (climax) and, in some cases, state the lesson to be learned.

All good stories will follow this sequence. In many stories that children write, one of these three pieces may be missing. How can children learn to construct stories that contain all three components? By deliberately modeling their stories after existing stories which contain these components. Summarizing tales like “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” or “The

**Score of “1” indicates:**

The writing lacks a clear sense of direction. Ideas, details, or events seem strung together in a loose or random fashion—or else there is no identifiable internal structure. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:

- Sequencing needs work.
- There is no real lead to set up what follows and no real conclusion to wrap things up.
- Pacing is awkward; the paper slows to a crawl when the reader wants to get on with it and vice versa.
- Connections between ideas are confusing or missing.
- Organizational problems deter the reader from grasping the main point or storyline.

**III. Voice****Score of “5” indicates:**

The writer speaks directly to the reader in an individualistic, expressive, and engaging way. Clearly, the writer is involved in the text, is sensitive to the needs of an audience, and writes to be read.

- The reader feels a strong interaction with the writer, sensing the person behind the words.
- Tone and voice give flavor to the message and are appropriate for the purpose and audience.
- Narrative writing seems honest, appealing, and written from the heart.
- Expository or persuasive writing reflects a strong commitment to the topic and an effort to bring the topic to life by anticipating the reader's questions and showing why the reader should care or want to know more.

**Score of “3” indicates:**

The writer seems sincere but not fully engaged or involved. The result is pleasant or even personable, but not compelling.

- The writing communicates in an earnest, pleasing manner. Moments here and there surprise, amuse, or move the reader.
- Voice emerges strongly on occasion, then retreats behind general, dispassionate language.
- The writer seems aware of an audience, but often weighs words carefully or discards personal insights in favor of safe generalities.
- The writing hides as much of the writer as it reveals.

Emperor’s New Clothes,” a child can easily write an engaging piece. If the student changes the characters or setting but follows a prescribed plot, he or she can creatively expand or vary the storyline but not be completely separated from story sequence. After following model stories several times, the child will be more likely to intuitively understand what he needs for an effective story and thus compose original fiction with better organization.

**Non-Fiction Compositions**

Planning for non-fiction writing includes knowing the length of the required composition. This will determine the number of facts or ideas to include. The number of paragraphs will determine the number of topics, and each paragraph should hold an appropriate number of facts. By using an outline to “pre-write,” “brainstorm,” or plan the number and order of facts, the writer will then have more freedom to attend to the details of style and mechanics. By separating the two activities of thinking (planning what to write) and composing those ideas into sentences, children will be more able to demonstrate a good compositional organization; whereas if they start by writing sentences without notes or planning, they are much more likely to “ramble” and it becomes much harder to reorganize ideas if needed.

**Paragraph Structure**

In Units 3 and 4, students learn that a paragraph has a purpose and is a unit of thought, not just an indentation or semi-random break in the text. With fiction, a paragraph may indicate a new component of the story sequence. With non-fiction, it must indicate a new topic has begun. By using the Topic—Clincher rule (see Unit IV), students create paragraphs which start and end on the same topic. Consequently, their paragraphs are more cohesive and focused. By using a “transitional” clincher, the student establishes a connection to the next topic. Thus paragraphs have clearly defined purposes.

All the units teach different model outlines or “skeletons” upon which to hang ideas. Using these models and following the topic/clincher guidelines will allow the children to exercise and demonstrate a significantly higher level of organization.

**III. Voice**

**Q:** How do we help a child learn to speak to the reader in an “expressive, appealing, engaging” way and write “from the heart”?

**A:** Give them a repertoire of stylistic techniques!

**Score of “1” indicates:**

The writer seems indifferent, uninvolved, or distanced from the topic and/or the audience. As a result, the writing is lifeless or mechanical; depending on the topic, it may be overly technical or jargonistic. The paper reflects more than one of the following problems:

- It is hard to sense the writer behind the words. The writer does not reach out to an audience or anticipate their interests and questions.
- The writer speaks in a monotone that flattens all potential highs or lows of the message.
- The writing may communicate on a functional level but does not move or involve the reader.
- The writer does not seem sufficiently at home with the topic to take risks, share personal insights, or make the topic/story personal and real for the reader.

**IV. Word Choice****Score of “5” indicates:**

Words convey the intended message in a precise, interesting and natural way.

- Words are specific and accurate; it is easy to understand just what the writer means.
- The language is natural and never overdone; phrasing is highly individual.
- Lively verbs energize the writing. Precise nouns and modifiers create pictures in the reader's mind.
- Striking words and phrases often catch the reader's eye—and linger in the reader's mind.
- Clichés and jargon are used sparingly and only for effect.

**Score of “3” indicates:**

The language is functional, even if it lacks punch; the reader can easily figure out the writer's general meaning.

- Words are almost always correct and adequate; they simply lack flair.
- Familiar words and phrases communicate, but rarely capture the reader's imagination. Still, the paper may have one or two fine moments.
- Attempts at colorful language come close to the mark but sometimes seem overdone.
- Energetic verbs or picturesque phrases liven things up occasionally.

**Score of “1” indicates:**

The writer struggles with a limited vocabulary, searching for words to convey meaning. The

Compare writing to playing a musical instrument; before we can easily express emotion through music, we must absolutely master the techniques and skills necessary to create a variety of dynamics, phrasing, articulations, etc. We cannot expect artistry, nor can we judge people's musical expression, unless they have the required skills.

Through the Syllabus in Style, children develop fluency with a variety of grammatical constructions which enable them to write ideas and facts in seemingly unique ways. The decorations and triple extensions are particularly useful because they effectively attract the attention of readers and scorers.

- Questions in compositions engage the reader.
- Conversations and quotations add depth.
- Simile and/or metaphor add life and personality.
- Short sentences add drama and pizzazz.
- Alliteration, if not overused, adds poetry and humor.
- Triples (3 phrases, clauses, verbs, adverbs, etc. in one sentence) add sophistication and refinement.

Undeniably, each child's individuality will be reflected in their writing, but only to the degree that they have the experience or tools to do so. Just as the beautiful but untrained human voice can fail to mature to its fullest musical potential, the average but well-trained voice can become a superb musical asset. Writing is the same.

By practicing and becoming fluent with specific stylistic techniques, children will more quickly and easily expand their repertoire and range of expression, finding their own unique and compelling “voice” in writing.

**IV. Word Choice**

The only way that children can make good word choices is to have abundant words available from which to choose. Not only must they have the words on the “tip of their brain,” they must also have an understanding of nuances of meaning. This means vocabulary development through frequent practice with a wide variety of powerful and descriptive adjectives, verbs, and adverbs.

The “Dress-up” section of the Style Checklist requires a strong verb, quality adjective, and “ly” word in every paragraph the child writes. The “Banned Words List” forces alternate usages and the development of “thesaurus thinking.” The advanced

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writing reflects more than one of these problems:

- Language is so vague (e.g., She was neat, It was nice, We did lots of stuff) that only the most general message comes through.
- Persistent redundancy distracts the reader.
- Jargon or clichés serve as a crutch.
- Words are used incorrectly, sometimes making the message hard to decipher.
- Problems with language leave the reader wondering what the writer means to say.

## V. Sentence Fluency

### **Score of “5” indicates:**

The writing has an easy flow and rhythm when read aloud. Sentences are well built, with strong and varied structure that invites expressive oral reading.

- Sentences are constructed in a way that helps make meaning clear.
- Purposeful sentence beginnings show how each sentence relates to and builds upon the one before it.
- The writing has cadence, as if the writer has thought about the sound of the words as well as the meaning.
- Sentences vary in length as well as structure.
- Fragments, if used, add style.
- Dialogue, if used, sounds natural.

### **Score of “3” indicates:**

The text hums along with a steady beat, but tends to be more pleasant or businesslike than musical, more mechanical than fluid.

- Sentences may not seem artfully crafted or musical, but they are usually grammatical.
- There is at least some variation in sentence length and structure. Sentence beginnings are NOT all alike.
- The reader sometimes has to hunt for clues (e.g., connecting words and phrases like however, after a while, on the other hand, for example, next, first of all, later, although, etc.) that show how sentences interrelate.
- Parts of the text invite expressive oral reading; others may be stiff, awkward, or choppy.

### **Score of “1” indicates:**

The reader has to practice quite a bit in order to give this paper a fair interpretive reading. The writing reflects more than one of the following problems:

TWSS, cont.

dress-ups include dual verbs, dual adjectives and dual “ly’s” which further exercise “vocabulary muscles.”

By providing lists for the children to easily see and utilize in their daily writing, teachers can help children rapidly gain familiarity and confidence with a much wider vocabulary than daily life and conversation would offer.

Since the spelling of difficult or unusual words might hinder a child’s desire to use them, spelling lists that include the posted adverbs and banned word synonyms should be regularly emphasized.

Effective word choice will also be a direct result of basic literacy and language exposure. Once again, reading—especially non-fiction—is vital. With children for whom reading is still slow or laborious, high quality audiotapes with stories, histories, and biographies should be introduced. This will help provide exposure to the vocabulary and formal language patterns which are essential for good word choice in writing.

## V. Sentence Fluency

Left on their own, children will often write compositions that follow a very repetitive pattern of subject-verb-object. Many teachers and parents get frustrated with young students’ writing, which frequently have many sequential sentences which begin with words such as:

And they . . . And so he . . . Then she . . . So it . . . So then they . . .

This is an enemy of sentence fluency. Another common problem is the run-on sentence, which may include “and” three, four, or even five times in one sentence. When parents and teachers encounter these problems, they want to instruct, “don’t do that,” but the child cannot easily “not do it” unless he learns something to replace the incorrect practice.

The “Sentence Openers” section of the Style Checklist teaches and, in fact, requires the use of several very specific alternatives to the “subject first” type of sentence. As children choose a “clausal starter” word and consciously try to use it as the first word in a sentence, the structure changes. Students can simply choose a preposition from an extensive list and try to make their fact or idea fit, creating a different style of sentence. By using an “-ing” or “-ed” (participle) opener, the young writer can often combine two actions into one sentence. Addition-

NWREL, cont.

- Sentences are choppy, incomplete, rambling or awkward; they need work.
- Phrasing does not sound natural, the way someone might speak.
- The reader must sometimes pause or re-read to get the meaning.
- Many sentences begin the same way—and may follow the same patterns (e.g., subject-verb-object) in a monotonous pattern.
- Endless connectives (and, and so, but then, because, and then, etc.) create a massive jumble of language in which clear sentence beginnings and endings get swallowed up.
- The text doesn't invite expressive oral reading.

## VI. Conventions

### Score of “5” indicates:

The writer demonstrates a good grasp of standard writing conventions (e.g., grammar, capitalization, punctuation, usage, spelling, paragraph-ing) and uses conventions effectively to enhance readability. Errors tend to be so few and so minor that the reader can easily overlook them unless hunting for them specifically.

- Paragraphing tends to be sound and to reinforce the organizational structure.
- Grammar and usage are correct and contribute to clarity and style.
- Punctuation is accurate and guides the reader through the text.
- Spelling is correct, even on difficult words.
- The writer may manipulate conventions—especially grammar and spelling—for stylistic effect.

### Grades 7 and up only:

- The writing is sufficiently long and complex to allow the writer to show skill in using a wide range of conventions.
- Only light editing would be required to polish the text for publication.

### Score of “3” indicates:

The writer shows reasonable control over a limited range of standard writing conventions.

- Conventions are sometimes handled well and enhance readability; at other times, errors are distracting and impair readability.
- Paragraphing is attempted. Paragraphs sometimes run together or begin in the wrong places.
- Terminal (end-of sentence) punctuation is usually correct; internal punctuation (commas, apostrophes, semicolons, dashes, colons,

TWSS, cont.

ally, placing an “ly” adverb as the first word in the sentence can often make a smooth transition. Very short sentences are important. Sentence styles must vary.

Not surprisingly, teachers and parents often appreciate a fluent writing style without recognizing exactly what they like about it. It just “sounds” good. By learning and practicing with a checklist of sentence openers, children will develop not only the ability to manipulate words to fit an assigned sentence pattern, but also a sense of which openers might be most useful or artistic in a given instance. The formula is almost magic.

Once students have the ability to use a variety of stylistic techniques, they will be better equipped to evaluate the work of other writers and find out why they like or don't like the way it reads. (You can even learn to analyze and subtly imitate a professor's style, making him think you are a brilliant writer.)

Of all the concepts presented in the *Teaching Writing: Structure & Style* syllabus, the conscious use of a variety of sentence openers is perhaps the most powerful tool in improving writing. It creates superb sentence fluency.

**NOTE:** As with any developing skill in life, awkward usages will probably appear when students try to use sentence styles new to them. This is normal. Again comparing writing to music, would a good teacher expect a child to play every note and rhythm perfectly when learning a new piece? Anticipate incorrect and awkward interpretations. Errors in writing that result from trying new techniques provide opportunity for refinement and the more meaningful teaching of grammar in context.

Like learning to play the piano or to sing, writing is an art; improvement in ability depends on modeling and practice, practice and refinement.

## VI. Conventions

Spelling and punctuation should be taught as separate subjects. When using the Structure & Style approach, there is always a first draft and a final copy. Spelling and punctuation are always corrected with the help of the teacher. Creating a habit of always checking and rewriting will strengthen the students sensitivity to correcting, when possible, mistakes with conventions.

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- parentheses) is sometimes missing or wrong.
- Spelling is usually correct or reasonably phonetic on common words.
- Moderate editing would be required to polish the text for publication.

**Score of “1” indicates:**

Errors in spelling, punctuation, usage and grammar, capitalization, and/or paragraphing repeatedly distract the reader and make the text difficult to read. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:

- Paragraphing is missing, irregular, or so frequent that it has no relationship to the organizational structure of the text.
- Errors in grammar or usage are very noticeable, and may affect meaning, while punctuation (including terminal punctuation) is often missing or incorrect.
- Spelling errors are frequent, even on common words. Extensive editing would be required to prepare the composition for publication.

TWSS, cont.

Children can only fully implement their knowledge of spelling, punctuation, and grammar if and when they take time to read what they have written and correct errors. When teachers use a checklist-based system of instruction in writing, the child is forced to read what she has written to assure that every required element is present in the composition. This forces the habit of rereading and self-editing.

*The Teaching Writing: Structure & Style* syllabus provides numerous ways to integrate writing into the study of practically everything—science, history, geography, literature, religion, biography. By using models and checklists for daily writing, teachers and parents will see remarkable results. Instruction and practice with these models and techniques are very effective in helping all students score well when their writing is evaluated by the six traits analysis rubric. It will also be of great help in preparing them for higher education and for life.

The Six-Trait Writing Model was taken from the NWREL web site:

<http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/scoring.php?d=9>

## Writing Your Lesson Plans

Fall brings the new school year and, with it, the opportunity to renew one’s determination for excellence in teaching writing. Like playing violin or learning to paint, writing is an art which improves only with guided practice. Although many teachers and parents begin the year with grandiose ideas, these can quickly take a back seat to the urgencies of life. Success requires goals, it requires consistency, and it requires timing. With these three basic components, organized lesson plans can make the difference between steady progress through a syllabus or a jerky stop-and-go approach with more “stop” than “go.” Let’s plan a bit for this year together.

### *A Primary Goal*

Among the basic goals of the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* approach is the need to make writing a part of the study of content subjects, not a subject unto itself. Using material from science, biography, or history books as “source texts,” careful teachers can accentuate or reinforce key ideas while practicing writing techniques like “dress-up” and topic—clinchers in paragraphs. Although many teachers find isolating “ideal” paragraphs for summarizing is difficult, experienced teachers have found that in reality, virtually any paragraph from any page can be used for note-taking and summarizing with the Unit I/II or Unit IV model. To integrate stories with content, how about changing the setting of a myth or fable to reflect the place or time being studied in history or geography? The hare and the tortoise could as easily be set in early America or modern day Africa as in ancient Greece. They could race from Philadelphia to Washington and the hare awakens only to find the capital of the United States has been relocated there! The possibilities are endless. The Unit V model (Writing from Pictures) can work as effectively with describing three photographs depicting stages of embryonic development as it can with a Calvin & Hobbes comic. When in church or Sunday school, take notes and summarize from those notes during the week. A thank you note for gifts and a letter to the editor are excellent opportunities for taking “notes from the brain” as taught in Unit VII. Don’t rely on “canned” text; rather, establish a goal to make writing a fundamental part of the study of all subjects.

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