



The Power of the Traits

Good cooks know that the secret to a great recipe is in the sauce. And good teachers know that the secret to great writing instruction is in the comments they give students about their work—comments that pinpoint both strengths and weaknesses. Since the inception of the Trait model in the mid-1980s, teachers and students have been better able to communicate about writing by focusing discussion on ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. Having a common language has had a revolutionary effect on the assessment and teaching of writing. There is no better way to motivate students than by showing them exactly what they need to do and where they need to go, using trait-specific comments.

Writing well is important in all grades, but it has particular significance in middle school because these students have so much to say. Most of the middle schoolers I know are brimming with thoughts and opinions, which often make excellent topics for short and long pieces of writing. They are also under pressure to perform well on state tests, in English class, and in content area classes, where they have little or no say about topics but must still find a way to make their writing meaningful. This is no easy task.

Indeed, middle school students are not only expected to write more than elementary students, they are expected to write better. The traits help them meet these expectations—and exceed them. They enable them to understand, in a deep and thoughtful way, how writing works. Students see firsthand the difference it makes to focus their topic, organize their ideas logically, add voice, use just-right words, make their sentences flow, apply conventions with style and skill, and make their piece as appealing to the eye as possible.

I've assembled this book of trait-specific comments to assist you in providing students with constructive feedback on revision and editing. The comments are aligned with the all-new, trait-specific scoring guides for middle school, according to three performance levels: high, medium, and low. Once you've assessed a paper, it's easy to pinpoint the comments that will help the writer most. See pages 6–7 for guidelines on assessing papers and choosing comments.

Defining the Traits for Middle School Students

The traits of writing provide the language we use to describe what writers really do as they draft, revise, and edit. As such, we can use them to drive assessment, instruction, and classroom talk.

IDEAS: the piece's content—its central message and details that support that message.

ORGANIZATION: the internal structure of the piece—the thread of logic, the pattern of meaning.

VOICE: the tone and tenor of the piece—the personal stamp of the writer, which is achieved through a strong understanding of purpose and audience.

WORD CHOICE: the specific vocabulary the writer uses to convey meaning and enlighten the reader.

SENTENCE FLUENCY: the way the words and phrases flow through the piece. It is the auditory trait because it's "read" with the ear as much as the eye.

CONVENTIONS: the mechanical correctness of the piece. Correct use of conventions (spelling, capitalization, punctuation, paragraphing, and grammar and usage) guides the reader through the text easily.

PRESENTATION: the physical appearance of the piece. A visually appealing text provides a welcome mat. It invites the reader in.

Comments: Voice

- A. "It's clear that you enjoyed writing about this topic because it comes through loud and clear in your tone. Your writing is filled with your unique voice, making it believable and authentic."
- B. "Because the purpose for your writing is so clear, I grasped the main idea immediately and wanted to read on. The voice stands out because you had a clear sense of why you were writing the piece in the first place."
- C. "Because you understand what readers need to know, your voice is strong in this piece. Your own sense of wonder and fascination about the topic is infectious."
- D. "You've stuck your neck out in a few places, reaching to find a new way to say familiar things and adding your own perspective. The writing sounds like you, which gives it voice."

- A. "Your piece contains voice, though it's not all that compelling. You hide how you feel about this topic a lot of the time. Build on moments where you show how you feel in order to establish a tone and strengthen the voice."
- B. "Though I see what you are writing about, I'm struggling a little to understand why you're writing about it. You've not yet convinced me that this topic has meaning to you and, until you do, your voice won't come through."
- C. "What fascinates you about this topic? I'd like to hear that come through in your voice. The distance you're keeping between yourself and the reader is too wide."
- D. "Your voice is strongest in places where you reached for a novel way to express a familiar idea or tried something new with words and phrases. Find those places and build on them to strengthen the voice in this piece."

- A. "Voice brings a piece to life. It's missing in this draft, though. What matters to you about this topic? Try adding your personal perspective to establish a tone."
- B. "So far, this piece is a collection of random thoughts, details, and examples related to the topic. What is missing is your main point—your reason for writing the piece in the first place. That's where your voice will begin to show, too."
- C. "I'm concerned that the tone you've used here is inappropriate given your purpose for writing the piece. Think about your readers and the right words to connect with them to create voice."
- D. "I know you. You are a unique person. Can you change some of the words and phrases in this piece so your voice comes through to the reader? At this point, you are missing."